

KELLY E. HAYES

Holy Harlots

Femininity,
Sexuality, &
Black Magic
in Brazil



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*Femininity, Sexuality, and Black Magic
in Brazil*

Kelly E. Hayes



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To CAC

*Thank you for everything you have ever done,
but most of all for bringing me along on this
world-record journey of happiness.*

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PART ONE

Introduction

Wicked Women and Femmes Fatales

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Wicked Women and Femmes Fatales

This entity that was incorporated in her was *gargalhando* [cackling] horribly and saying, “She is mine, I am going to take her to the cemetery, I am going to take her to the grave, to the sepulcher, she is mine!” She was grimacing and gnashing her teeth and we were trying to get her to go inside, but she wouldn’t, she had a force inside of her and she wouldn’t budge. But finally, we succeeded in getting her inside, and she was cursing me and glaring at me and it wasn’t her in there. And I became terrified at that, by that thing that had dominated her.

—Nilmar

CIGARETTES, *CACHAÇA*, AND CEMETERIES

Recalling the fearsome, cigarette-devouring entity that had taken possession of his wife, Nazaré, some dozen years before, Nilmar glanced around the small, street-side kiosk where the three of us sat huddled across a table before continuing in a low voice:

And this is something that I knew if I told anyone outside, they would never believe me, but she broke all the bottles in the place, as she was passing by, they just exploded. She never touched them, but they exploded. And then she sat there on the ground, in the middle of the temple, and began to light cigarette after cigarette and to eat them—lit cigarettes. She ate them one after another, and at the time she didn’t smoke. She grabbed a bottle of *cachaça* [rum] and guzzled the whole thing down.¹

For those familiar with the Afro-Brazilian spirit world, Nilmar’s account of his wife’s strange behavior clearly indicates the presence of the

raucous Pomba Gira. The generic term for a class of female spirit entities, all of whom share certain features as well as a specific denominative,² Pomba Gira is recognizable by her distinctive *gargalhada* (throaty cackle), brazen manner, and appetite for cigarettes and strong drink. In the stories and songs through which her mythology circulates, Pomba Gira is portrayed as “a woman of ill repute,” sometimes a courtesan, sometimes a prostitute, but always a woman whose erotic life while on earth contravened the norms of proper feminine comportment and whose disembodied spirit continues to be linked to the world of the living. Because of these ties, Pomba Gira is believed capable of erupting into people’s lives in unpredictable ways.

Drawing on dominant notions of female sexuality as both alluring and perilous, images and statuary of Pomba Gira depict her as a voluptuous demon clad in red, sometimes brandishing a trident (figure 1). Such representations link her to a long European Catholic tradition of seductresses, succubae, and other diabolical female figures. Another branch of her family tree connects her to Africa and to the deities of the Central and West African peoples who were brought to Brazil as slaves during the three-hundred-year course of that transatlantic trade. Adepts of Umbanda and other Afro-Brazilian religions frequently describe Pomba Gira as the female form or counterpart of Exu, the mercurial trickster figure derived from the Yoruba deity Esu, who in Brazil became conflated with the Devil.

Like the figure of the Devil, Pomba Gira is recognized far outside the confines of sectarian religion. She has become a stereotypical figure in the Brazilian imaginary, and references to her may be found in popular *telenovelas* (prime-time soap operas), literature, cinema, popular music, and street slang. As a result most Brazilians know at least the broad outlines of her popular mythology. Indeed this profile is familiar to any inhabitant of the Western world, for Pomba Gira is the quintessential femme fatale, that perilous seductress depicted in pulp fiction and film noir. Possibly evil, definitely dangerous, she embodies a uniquely Brazilian envisioning of femininity’s dark side. Like other ambivalent, erotically charged representations of supernatural femininity, such as Vodou’s Erzulie Danto or the Hindu goddesses Durga and Kali, Pomba Gira symbolizes the dangers that female sexuality poses to a social order in which positions of formal power are occupied almost entirely by men. By developing a relationship with this entity, devotees channel this ambivalent force in ways that can be individually—if seldom collectively—transformative.



FIGURE 1. Pomba Gira statues. Photo courtesy of Márcia Ines Alves.

Hailed as Sovereign of the Cemetery, Queen of the Crossroads, and Mistress of the Night, among other titles, Pomba Gira is venerated in myriad incarnations in small temples throughout the city of Rio de Janeiro and other urban centers. Each of these *pomba giras* has her own specific preferences and a more or less developed life story, although all share a family resemblance. They seem to be most popular among inhabitants of the poor and working-class neighborhoods that cling to Rio's steep hill-sides and ring its periphery, a population that sees in their stories aspects of their own lives and attributes to them the supernatural power to resolve their troubles. In midnight ceremonies devotees ritually summon these entities with drum and song to the human world, where, incarnated in the body of one or more trained mediums, individual *pomba giras* commune with admirers and attend their petitions. These are events of great revelry for it is said that *pomba giras* return to the human world not only to assist petitioners but to *se divertirem* (have fun): to dance, sing, enjoy their favorite vices, and be adored. Uncontrolled such spirits may possess the unsuspecting at will, provoking all manner of affliction and scandal. Abrupt or striking changes in an individual's manner, particularly those involving licentious or provocative behavior, unpredictable mood swings, vulgar language, rebelliousness, or debauchery, may be interpreted as evidence of possession by an untamed *pomba gira*.

According to Nilmar, it was just such disruptive conduct on the part of his wife that convinced him to seek help. After numerous episodes of odd or uncharacteristically aggressive behavior of which Nazaré vehemently denied any knowledge, Nilmar confided his troubles to a colleague, who advised him to consult a spiritual healer. Following this advice, Nilmar arranged to bring his wife to an Umbanda temple, telling her that they had been invited to visit a friend. Describing the events of that memorable afternoon, Nilmar recalled that, as the temple's leader emerged to greet them and Nazaré perceived the ruse, a terrifying force overcame her with an intensity that shattered glass bottles:

And the leader said to me, “Look, we have to do a *trabalho* [ritual work], she has to develop this spirit. You will need to buy the things for this *trabalho*.” He told us the day that the ceremony would be held and we bought the things required and we went. And so we began there, in this way. And only later, I began to find out that the crazy things that she was doing were the result of these entities.

Nazaré, who had been sitting silently throughout Nilmar's account, interjected, “I heard from my own mouth, but it wasn't me talking, that what [the spirit entity] wanted was *luz* [light].” Following the leader's instructions, the couple purchased the various items necessary for a complex ritual work, or *trabalho*, that would help Nazaré to “develop” the spirit, a popular incarnation of Pomba Gira named Maria Molambo das Sete Catacombas (Raggedy Maria of the Seven Catacombs). After this initial *trabalho*, Nazaré began to frequent Umbanda ceremonies, gradually learning how to ritually control what she and Nilmar came to understand as episodes of spirit possession and to limit them to the appropriate times and places.

Practitioners of Umbanda and other Afro-Brazilian spirit-based religions say that by “developing the spirit,” or establishing an intimate relationship of ritually mediated exchange, the afflicted is able to transform a disruptive experience into a constructive one. In return for their offerings of food, drink, praise, material items, and—temporarily—their own bodies, devotees believe that the spirits will mystically intervene on their behalf in the affairs of the human world. Such ritual exchanges between human and spirit are understood to generate various effects directly measurable in the lives of individuals, including healing, success in romantic or business endeavors, family harmony, well-being, protection from harm, the resolution of affliction, and other material benefits.³

This notion of reciprocal commitment between human and spirit is expressed by the polyvalent term *trabalho*, or work, a central organiz-

ing concept in Afro-Brazilian religions. Not only are certain rituals and offerings referred to as *trabalhos*, but devotees say that by providing the corporeal form by which the spirit can manifest itself in the world, they *trabalham* (work) with the spirits. In return spirits come back to the terrestrial world in order to *trabalhar*, attending the requests of humans in need of their spiritual assistance.⁴ Some say that by helping petitioners realize diverse desires, *pomba giras* gain the *luz* (light) necessary for their own spiritual progression. Among the spirit's devotees, mutually beneficial exchange is at the heart of Pomba Gira's cult, although the actions of such unruly entities can never be wholly controlled.

Nazaré spent the next decade cultivating her relationship with the spirits under the tutelage of different Afro-Brazilian spiritual leaders and honing her mediumship skills. As she learned to work with Maria Molambo and other spirit entities, the behaviors and feelings that she had come to understand as possession episodes became less disruptive to her home life and more amenable to ritual control. Like many who work with the spirits, in time she started her own cult center, holding ritual ceremonies and providing a range of spiritual and therapeutic services for clients in the basement of her home. Nazaré attributed this endeavor not to her own agency but to that of Maria Molambo, whose reputation had begun to attract clients and petitioners from the neighborhood seeking the spirit's assistance. Those in the know say that Pomba Gira specializes in resolving intimate questions of love, erotic attraction, money, and power, those problematic arenas of life where deeply held desires often clash with dominant moral codes.

This connection with the hidden or illicit dimensions of human desire and with the rituals intended to realize these desires links Pomba Gira with *macumba* or *quimbanda*,⁵ pejorative terms for those Afro-Brazilian spiritual practices that outsiders classify as immoral or malevolent—that is, black magic. As a result many people distance themselves from Pomba Gira and her devotees. Yet for those who claim to work with these spirits, receiving them in possession trance, Pomba Gira can be an efficacious if ambivalent ally. A marginalized figure herself, Pomba Gira speaks to many of the lived realities of her devotees. At once reviled and celebrated, demanding and dangerous, she embodies the volatility and stigma of life on Brazil's urban margins.

WORKING ON THE SELF AND THE WORLD

In this book I examine the intersections of magic, morality, and social marginalization in contemporary Brazil as they are embodied in and through the figure of Pomba Gira. However, though the bawdy spirit is my ostensible subject, what follows is neither a history nor a biography of a supernatural being. Rather than abstract this imaginative persona from the human dramas in which she figures, I focus on the significance of Pomba Gira in the life of an individual devotee, Maria Nazaré de Souza Oliveira, a working-class housewife, mother, and spiritual healer who lives with her extended family on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro.⁶ Situating the spirit within the particularities of Nazaré's life, I explore her relationship with Pomba Gira as a means for "working on the self and the world," to borrow the historian Robert Orsi's formulation.⁷ The book's real subject is the myriad ways that individuals endeavor to transform both themselves and the world around them through stories and ritual practices invoking this spirit entity, and how they are transformed in the process.

Because Pomba Gira is a widely recognized persona within Brazil's cultural imaginary—that inventive landscape of legendary beings, supernatural entities, and archetypal characters that exists in every society, I begin by describing the main characteristics of this spirit as portrayed in the stories, songs, and images through which her mythology circulates. Although she appears in multiple forms, Pomba Gira is always a woman who defies patriarchal criteria of feminine respectability. Historically speaking, she seems to have first emerged as a distinctive entity with her own characteristics and skills among urban Afro-Brazilian cult practitioners in the early twentieth century from a matrix of European and African conceptualizations of femininity, sexuality, and magical action.

Like all supernatural beings, however, Pomba Gira takes on the breath of life—that is, she exists and is meaningful—only at the permeable interface between an external, social environment and an internal world of personal experience. Stories and rituals involving this entity must accord with consensually accepted meanings in order to be accepted as authentic, but to be effective they also must address issues or conflicts particular to the afflicted person herself. So after outlining Pomba Gira's culturally determined and collectively shared features, I consider Nazaré's experience in more detail, exploring this entity's role in the circumstances of Nazaré's life, both as she narrated it to me and

as I observed it from 2000 to 2002 and in subsequent visits of shorter duration since that time.⁸ This provides the setting for a more detailed discussion of the role of Pomba Gira in the intimate struggles of daily life on the poor and working-class fringes of Rio de Janeiro.

Close attention to the interplay between Nazaré's narrative and ritual invocations of Pomba Gira and events in her life highlights the strategic appeal of this "woman of the street," who is regularly called upon in situations of domestic distress or romantic intrigue. Nazaré's case illustrates how appeals to this spirit function in a social setting where men and women have different levels of involvement in and expectations about sexual intimacy, marriage, and family responsibility and are subject to different standards of moral behavior. In a move that initially might seem paradoxical, by invoking the spirit of an unruly harlot Pomba Gira's mediums avail themselves of an alternative envisioning of spiritual power that, in rupturing established norms of feminine conduct and moral action, holds out the possibility for effecting various transformations.

Moving from the collective world of normative meanings and values to the inward experiences of individuals and back again, my interpretive strategy situates narratives, possession performances, and ritual works involving Pomba Gira within a broader landscape of Afro-Brazilian spiritual traditions and contemporary social dynamics in Rio, as well as within the more intimate setting of one woman's domestic life. This analytical frame highlights Pomba Gira's function as a symbolic agent mediating individual bodies and experiences and conventional discourses within Brazilian society about gender, sexuality, desire, and moral action.

To put it in slightly different terms, I approach Pomba Gira as a form of social discourse: a conceptual and experiential frame for the expression of various disjunctive experiences, interpersonal conflicts, perceived threats to the self, or other stresses, for which there may be few other socially acceptable outlets.⁹ As is the case with other examples of spirit-based traditions in which women predominate, such as Candomblé, Santería, Puerto Rican Espiritismo, urban Vodou, Korean Shamanism, and the Zar cults of North and East Africa, to name a few, working with Pomba Gira can be seen as a creative yet culturally sanctioned response to restrictive gender roles or inadequate love relationships, a way to express otherwise forbidden thoughts or feelings, and an economic strategy for women who have few options beyond the traditional wifely role.¹⁰ Yet the fact that this entity is incorporated

overwhelmingly by two segments of the urban population in Rio de Janeiro, housewives and effeminate or homosexual men, indicates that she speaks particularly to problematic issues involving gender, sexuality, morality, and desire—particularly those desires condemned as illicit or improper.¹¹

The disjuncture between normative mores that are continually reinforced in various ways and the life experiences of Pomba Gira's predominantly lower-class and working-class devotees provides significant fodder for interactions with this spirit entity. Through their narrative and ritual invocations of Pomba Gira, individuals like Nazaré give form to otherwise inchoate experiences produced by, among other things, deeply felt incongruities between their own circumstances or desires and prevailing social norms. Embodied in Pomba Gira, the holy harlot, these tensions are made dramatically manifest in the material world, thereby becoming subject to human reflection and manipulation. In this sense Pomba Gira and other Afro-Brazilian spirit entities provide a set of symbolic resources and ritual strategies by which individuals are empowered to work on themselves and the world around them.

But we also may see in the phenomenon of Pomba Gira something like what Stephan Palmié referred to as “ghostly revenants of disavowed pasts,” the spectral evidence of a conceptual universe that, rather than having been superseded by modernity and its correlative systems of knowledge and social control, serves as its illegitimate other.¹² In other words, narratives about and ritual performances of Pomba Gira participate in an alternative moral imagination that has been systematically delegitimized within and by more hegemonic discourses. This alternative moral imagination relies on different configurations of gender, sexuality, and power and offers different interpretive possibilities for narrating the self and acting in the world. Within its universe of meaning, ritual works that appeal to Pomba Gira function as strategic forms of action that attempt to make sense of what is experienced as “morally senseless or qualifiable as outright evil” by forging other connections between cause and effect.¹³ Among those who serve Pomba Gira or procure her services—men and women who have seen little improvement in the quality of their lives despite social and economic transformations in Brazil over the past several decades—this spirit promises to intervene in the occult flows by which scarce and desired resources seem always to flow to well-positioned others.

POMBA GIRA IN NARRATIVE AND RITUAL PERFORMANCE

Although Pomba Gira's actions are intimately related to the circumstances of their own lives, devotees like Nazaré understand this spirit as a wholly autonomous being with her own desires and volition. They describe Pomba Gira as an active if unpredictable presence and frequently recount stories about her mystical activities, integrating their personal experiences with themes drawn from a larger mythological corpus. More than an interpretive lens that orders and imparts coherence to the world, these stories also are employed to reimagine events over which their narrators otherwise have little control, disclosing an occult world of alternative possibilities and meanings. Always the figure of Pomba Gira is portrayed as a vehement, passionate force that devotees rely on to bring clarity to troublesome situations.

The qualities of vehemence and passion also mark Pomba Gira's physical presence among her devotees. As in many other spirit-focused religions, the phenomenon of possession in Afro-Brazilian traditions is expressed by alterations of behavior, voice, gesture, bodily posture, and—according to practitioners—subjective experience, whose characteristics and governing codes are widely known. Embodied, *pomba gira* spirits are at once flirtatious and aggressive, grandiose and vulgar, and those who incorporate them, whether men or women, are temporarily transformed into powerful queens and outrageous whores who strut, preen, frolic, curse, and revel in the communal adulation of their audience (figure 2). Though mediums typically claim to remember nothing of the experience afterward, incarnating these spirits undoubtedly permits them an exhilarating moment in the spotlight, an opportunity to engage in an erotically charged performance of feminine power, and an occasion to experience themselves as glamorous, dominant, and adored.

Moreover, because Pomba Gira is known to have a sharp tongue, those who incorporate these entities are free to admonish members of the community, often to the point of insult. One of her most defining traits is a blunt candor that can provoke scandal and discord but also, in exposing social rifts, can set in motion a process of healing. As a young admirer advised me, Pomba Gira “speaks the truth even if it hurts.” In the guise of the spirit, possessed devotees may criticize or make demands of family members, a husband, and other loved ones.¹⁴ And as Nazaré's example illustrates, those women who successfully claim to incarnate Pomba Gira—who provide the human body through which this entity is made



FIGURE 2. Nazaré dressed as Pomba Gira.

materially present—can expand their autonomy, reputation, and ability to earn a living in ways that adherence to more conventional female roles precludes.

However, though the rewards of working with this spirit can be significant, so are the sacrifices. Pomba Gira is a difficult mistress, capable of wreaking havoc in her devotees' lives as well as restoring domestic tranquility. Those who work with her believe that they enter into an intimate, lifelong relationship with an entity who demands unfailing loyalty and is quick to castigate those who displease her. Fulfilling one's obligations to Pomba Gira involves a significant investment of time, energy, and money and can strain a medium's relationships with her flesh-and-blood family. By their own testimony, many women experience their affiliation with these spirits as both an asset and a burden and frequently emphasize its onerous aspects. As Nazaré characterized it, "I don't have free choice, I don't have it. I don't have my own life. I am a slave of the [spirit]."

Beyond the extensive ritual obligations that mediums incur, some of the greatest difficulties engendered by working with Pomba Gira are

those that arise from the triangulated relations between a medium, her possessing entity, and her loved ones.¹⁵ For women in particular, balancing the demands of Pomba Gira with the demands of husbands or male partners is an ongoing process fraught with jealousies, clashes of interest, and power struggles. Successfully managing this convoluted intersection of human and spirit requires considerable skill. And because many of the conflicts that are produced cannot themselves be resolved through appeals to Pomba Gira, mediums must resort to other strategies. Nazaré's example is instructive because it shows not only the license that working with this transgressive entity can grant her mediums, but also its very real limits. As we will see, Maria Molambo's actuation in Nazaré's life has provoked as many difficulties as it ostensibly has resolved.

MORALITY, BLACK MAGIC, AND *MACUMBA*

Although remarkable in certain ways, Nazaré is not unique. The experiences that eventually led her to Umbanda are ones shared by many women living in Rio's urban periphery. How she transformed these experiences into a career as a spiritual healer also is not terribly unusual. Indeed Nazaré is characteristic of women who serve the spirits: an urban, working-class housewife and mother who claims to cede her body regularly to a host of *pomba gira* and other Afro-Brazilian spirit entities and who struggles to balance the demands of this spirit work with the demands of her family. Yet little has been written about people like Nazaré, the everyday practitioners of an eclectic and de-centralized spirit tradition that freely combines elements from various religions, emphasizes innovation over fidelity to a putatively ancestral heritage, and focuses in ritually concrete ways on the pragmatic and material problems of its devotees.¹⁶ More often these practices have been dismissed as charlatanism or *feitiçaria*, that is, black magic.

Although the academic literature on Afro-Brazilian religions has not reflected the perspective of people like Nazaré, diffuse, eclectic, innovative, and pragmatically focused spiritual traditions have played an important role as a contrastive foil against which particular Afro-Brazilian modalities have been defined as authentically legitimate and systematized according to specific criteria. The amorphous category of *feitiçaria* has long been critical both for scholars interested in defining and identifying "legitimate" religion, and for elites concerned to police the nation's black and working-class masses.¹⁷

In Brazil African-derived spiritual traditions were a perennial source of concern for slave owners, civil authorities, lawyers, educators, criminologists, scholars, newspaper editors, and chroniclers of city life since enslaved Africans were first brought to the former Portuguese colony in large numbers in the eighteenth century. With the final abolition of slavery in 1888 and the establishment of the first Republic in 1889, the legal recognition of formerly enslaved blacks as citizens meant that a racialized hierarchy was no longer explicitly encoded in law. But of course a social order predicated on unequal relationships is neither created nor dissolved solely through legislative means, and so after the final abolition of slavery the forms of domination shifted, reconfiguring in diffuse and less codified systems.

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth elites cloaked their racial concerns in the language of hygiene, criminality, and a paternalistic nationalism, warning of the threats posed to the country's physical and moral health, as well as its national development, by its dark-skinned masses.¹⁸ Various measures were adopted as prophylaxis, including the infamous policy of *branqueamento*, which brought thousands of Europeans (principally Germans and Italians) to the Brazilian hinterlands, where, it was hoped, they would both increase the country's economic production and mate with the natives, gradually producing a whiter—and more evolved—population.¹⁹ In Rio public health campaigns were implemented to clean up “unhealthy regions” and demolish crowded tenements, forcing their predominately Afro-Brazilian occupants out of the city center.²⁰

Even more perturbing to elites were the spiritual practices of the blacks and lower classes, believed to reflect their inferior mental state and credulity but also the potential—in the form of *feticaria*—to wreak social havoc. Although Brazil's Republican constitution guaranteed freedom of religion, legislation prohibiting the “illicit” practices of medicine, magic, and curing granted the state de facto jurisdiction and punitive power over Afro-Brazilian religions and their adherents.²¹ As a result, from the late nineteenth century and well into the twentieth practitioners of these traditions were subject to prosecution by civil authorities and their ritual objects periodically confiscated in police raids.²² Lurid news accounts throughout this period portrayed African-derived religions as depraved and their followers as prone to immoral and criminal acts, and outraged readers regularly wrote to newspaper editors demanding that the authorities put an end to the scourge of black sorcery. As late as the 1970s,

according to some observers, Afro-Brazilian cult groups were still subject to episodic incidents of police persecution.²³

Given the virulently anti-African atmosphere of the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth it is surprising that the classic scholarly works on Afro-Brazilian traditions, with some notable exceptions, focused on the demonstrably African aspects of these religions.²⁴ The bulk of this scholarship was produced between the 1930s and the 1960s, a time when many government officials, prominent intellectuals, and other elites considered Brazil's Afro-descendant populations to be the remnant of an inferior race (or, as Arthur Ramos put it, a "backwards class") whose debased spiritual activities threatened the public welfare.²⁵ Against this prevailing sentiment writers like Ramos, Edison Carneiro, and Melville Herskovits in the 1930s and 1940s, and later Roger Bastide and Pierre Verger, argued that the spiritual practices of blacks constituted a legitimate religion insofar as they had preserved an ancestral African heritage brought to Brazil by slaves and their descendents.

This so-called quest for African survivals helped bring international scholarly attention to Brazil, where it was believed that African traditions had been preserved remarkably intact.²⁶ As J. Lorand Matory observed, Brazil quickly became a *locus classicus* in the social science literature, as well as in intellectual debates about the degree and significance of the New World's African heritage.²⁷ From this convergence emerged an interpretative framework that understood variances in Afro-Brazilian cult groups as a product of their putative ethnic provenance in Africa, organized around two broad, cultural-linguistic categories: the West African Sudanese (which included the Yoruba, referred to as Nagô in Brazil) and the Central African Bantu.²⁸

For a variety of reasons Nagô religion was seen as more advanced in mythological, ritual, and organizational complexity than Bantu (sometimes referred to as Congo or Angola) religion, which was described consistently as impoverished and therefore highly susceptible to admixture.²⁹ In hindsight it is clear that this understanding was partly a result of the fact that Nagô-oriented Candomblé communities in Bahia served as important field sites for scholars studying Afro-Brazilian religions. Representatives of these communities were able to shape the discourse on these traditions by their own activism as well as alliances with politicians and scholars, the latter of whom reproduced the interested claims of their informants in their own work.³⁰ In spite of the problematic nature

of the assumptions underlying this Nagôcentric interpretive framework, over time it came to structure academic as well as popular perceptions of Brazil's African-derived religions.³¹

From the perspective of scholars and religious spokespeople interested in Afro-Brazilian religions as exemplars of African traditions preserved under the fragmenting conditions of slavery, signs of eclecticism and innovation were diagnostic of a process of decay or admixture that compromised the integrity of this African heritage.³² As a consequence popular spiritual traditions that freely combined African-derived elements with those derived from folk Catholic, Amerindian, Spiritist, or other sources, or that focused on the material desires of practitioners, tended to be seen as adulterated forms of one or more originally intact religions. Called variously *macumba*, *feitiçaria*, or low spiritism,³³ these eclectic Afro-Brazilian forms were thought to have become perverted in the course of absorbing multiple influences, losing their original integrity and degenerating into magic. One influential proponent of this view was Arthur Ramos, whose description of *macumba* is characteristic of the general attitude toward Afro-Brazilian heterogeneity in the 1930s and 1940s:

Macumba today is a generic term in all of Brazil that has come to designate not only religions of the Negro, but various magical practices—*despachos* [hexes], diverse rituals—that at times only remotely retain a connection with the primitive religious forms transplanted from Africa. Today there are macumbas for any purpose. The work of syncretism knows no limits. Macumba has invaded all spheres. It is at the root of popular forms of magic, which inherited much from the Negro but also has strong roots in the magical corpus of European origin.³⁴

For Ramos and many others, such eclecticism indicated that a process of corruption had transformed the practices in question from the category of licit interactions with the supernatural (i.e., religion) to the category of illicit interactions (i.e., magic).³⁵ Those who engaged in such adulterated and ignoble practices were dismissed as charlatans and sorcerers.

By insisting on the dissimilarities among various traditions, whether rooted in categorical oppositions between religion and magic or in the different cultural origins of African slaves, this interpretive framework both overestimated the separateness of various traditions and oversystematized them to accord with various criteria of legitimacy. Although it enabled the discursive establishment of certain forms of Afro-Brazilian tradition as authentic religions, it also stigmatized others and, overall, minimized their multiple articulations.

Concerns about the legitimacy of various spiritual practices continue to be widespread in Brazil, even as more recent scholarship has moved away from morally loaded typologies that oppose authentic and inauthentic forms of Afro-Brazilian religiosity. When learning of my interest in Afro-Brazilian religions, for example, colleagues and friends counseled me to turn my attention to Candomblé, particularly the form associated with the traditional houses of Bahia. They considered Candomblé an authentic religion, whose “pure” African heritage made it worthy of serious study. For them, Candomblé’s African ancestry was forcefully symbolized by the *orixás*, African deities at the center of Candomblé ritualizing, whose cult is highly formalized and complex, requiring years of apprenticeship to master. Although too polite to say it outright, those offering collegial advice implied that Nazaré’s spiritual life, centered on the troublemaking Pomba Gira, ought not to be considered a legitimate religion but something closer to the illicit pole of magic, or even *feticaria*, maleficent black magic.

But what separates religion from magic, legitimate spiritual practices from illegitimate ones? Who is empowered to define which appeals to the supernatural constitute religion and which do not? By what criteria? What are the ramifications of these classifications on the ground, in the lives of those whose spiritual pursuits are denigrated as black magic by those more able to disseminate their own point of view as normative? These are issues that I confronted repeatedly in the course of my fieldwork, as I struggled to comprehend the fault lines that divide the Afro-Brazilian religious field into various factions and the subtle (and not so subtle) ways these internal divisions were discursively produced and reproduced—even as the very classificatory distinctions at stake seemed to dissolve at the level of practice.

From the beginning there was the problem of nomenclature. Observing that Nazaré and the members of her community frequently referred to their distinctive spiritual practices as *Macumba*, I too began doing so, until Nazaré took me aside and cautioned me to use the more neutral term *Espiritismo* (Spiritism) when talking about her religion to outsiders. Although I didn’t fully realize it then, the term *macumba* summons a host of imaginative associations in the minds of many Brazilians,³⁶ conjuring up a world of hidden malice, pacts with the Devil, and clandestine midnight ceremonies, of savage desires given free rein and malevolent powers unleashed by pulsing drums. In other words, for most Brazilians *macumba* is synonymous with witchcraft or black magic: an occult practice drawing on mysterious powers for diabolical purposes

through the use of sacrificial offerings, incantations, or other suspect practices. Fully aware of the derogatory sense of the term, Nazaré and her followers nevertheless employed it among themselves to refer to their distinctive spiritual practices and objects, for which they denied any malevolent intent. In fact so unremarkable and ordinary was their usage that I did not initially perceive the irony.

Espiritismo, unlike *macumba*, carries no negative connotation. Both broader and more vague, the term refers to a number of traditions focused on the interactions of human and spirit beings through the practice of mediumship or other forms of spirit communication. To a Brazilian audience it denotes a set of spiritual beliefs and practices influenced by the writings of the French mystic and philosopher known as Allan Kardec, popular in Rio since the late nineteenth century.³⁷ Kardec claimed to have received insight into the true nature of the universe from various spirit entities, including those of deceased philosophers and statesmen, to whom he posed a series of questions through the intermediary of a medium. In *The Book of the Spirits* (1857), his most popular work, he presented these insights as a rational system fully congruent with modern science. Partly because of their claims to scientific legitimacy and influence among elites, Kardec's theories gained wide social acceptance in Brazil and informed a variety of "religious, philosophical, pseudo-scientific, parapsychological, and therapeutic movements" loosely classified under the term *Espiritismo*.³⁸ Today, like Candomblé, Espiritismo is widely considered a legitimate spiritual path and therefore a suitable subject for a foreign researcher.

At the time the finer distinctions and implicit connotations of these various terms, so clear to my interlocutors, were lost on me. In search of clarification, etymological and otherwise, I turned to the scholarly literature. There I found that although the term *macumba* has a long history of usage, there was little agreement among various authors about its meaning, linguistic origins, or the specific practices it denoted.³⁹ Despite these differences, *macumba's* deviant status was a point of widespread (although not unanimous) accord. Sometimes this deviancy was linked to *macumba's* alleged impurity, primitivism, or debauchery. At other times *macumba* was equated with charlatanism or described as *feitiçaria*, an accusation that once was applied to all African-derived religions in Brazil. Over time the term *macumba* came to designate that set of spirits, practices, and religious goals classified as illegitimate by a diverse set of actors in the struggle to assert the legitimacy of their own set of spirits, practices, and religious goals. As the criteria for religious

legitimacy changed, both in the works of various authors and over time, so did the characteristics attributed to *macumba*.

This ambiguity in the usage of the term *macumba* continues today. Some scholars and practitioners use it in a relatively neutral sense to refer to the Afro-Brazilian religions of Rio and the Southeast in comparison with Candomblé of Bahia and the Northeast. More often, however, *macumba* is used in common parlance to designate the ritual practices and associated objects (and places) that the speaker believes to be employed for morally questionable purposes. As a consequence of this prevailing usage, Afro-Brazilian practitioners like Nazaré tend to employ the term in an ironic fashion when speaking of their spiritual pursuits to other insiders, acknowledging its negative semantic valence while simultaneously affirming an alternative meaning. Used in this way *macumba* expresses not so much a specific set of practices or goals as what Vânia Cardoso referred to as a “form of sociality,” a shared vision of the world as permeated by spirit forces that can be influenced by human beings for good or ill.⁴⁰ Moreover in defiantly reappropriating the term as a form of positive self-identification, *macumbeiros*, or those who profess to practice *macumba*, manipulate its associated stigma for their own ends, among others, instilling fear among outsiders.

A note on my own terminology is therefore in order. For the sake of linguistic convenience and clarity, I use the terms *Umbanda*, *Candomblé*, *Espiritismo*, and *Macumba* throughout this book to refer to related but variant forms of Afro-Brazilian religious practice. In general I have followed the usage of my informants, who tended to use the term *Candomblé* to refer to communities professing adherence to an African heritage in which (1) the cult of the *orixás* receives primary or exclusive emphasis; (2) Yoruba or other African languages are used for liturgical functions; (3) rites of formal initiation involve a period of seclusion, animal sacrifice, and the observance of alimentary and sartorial taboos; (4) members are hierarchically organized based on initiatic age and level of ritual knowledge; and (5) ritual responsibilities are determined based on ties of fictive kinship forged through initiation, one’s gender, and the gender of one’s ruling *orixá*.

In contrast with Candomblé, my informants used the term *Umbanda* for communities that cultivated spirit entities in addition to the *orixás* and generally did not conduct formal rites of initiation, practice animal sacrifice, or employ a specialized liturgical language. *Espiritismo* and *Macumba* were used as generic terms for Afro-Brazilian religions in the ways that I discussed previously. Despite these and other differences in

matters of ritual, liturgical language, pantheon, and mythological corpus among the traditions ostensibly designated by these terms, there also are significant overlaps in practice, as I have mentioned. Further muddying the waters, individual practitioners often draw on multiple sources to structure their own engagement with the Afro-Brazilian spirit world and may employ any one of these terms when speaking of their religious pursuits, often using different terms when speaking to different audiences. Consequently the reader is advised that designations like *Candomblé* and *Umbanda* have a broader semantic range on the ground than might appear from the written page.

EXU SPIRITS AND THE MORAL ECONOMY OF THE STREET

Macumba's morally ambiguous potential is both symbolized and confirmed by its association with a class of ambivalent spirit entities called *exus*, derived from the Yoruba deity Esu (Exu in Portuguese). A trickster figure, Exu was transformed as the lives and needs of his New World devotees changed, losing some of his African characteristics and gaining characteristics specific to his new environment. Today a rich and open-ended mythology permits some Afro-Brazilian practitioners to emphasize a singular Exu who, like his Yoruba antecedent, is considered primarily a messenger deity and a playful, if unpredictable, *orixá*.⁴¹ Others perceive Exu through a Spiritist-influenced theological framework as a plurality of powerful and unruly "spirits of the shadows," who represent the darker aspects of the human psyche. Catholic theodicy contributed yet another layer of evocative associations to this figure when clerics and missionaries and their charges in both Africa and the New World equated Exu with the Devil, an identity that continues to be affirmed forcefully by some and contested with equal vigor by others.⁴²

Among practitioners of Umbanda, an Afro-Brazilian variant that emerged from the encounter of popular, African-derived traditions and Kardecist Spiritism sometime in the first three decades of the twentieth century, Exu represents not only a singular being but a class of colorful entities that includes Pomba Gira.⁴³ Known as *exus*, these entities are described as the spirits of former human beings who, for a variety of reasons, remain linked to the world of the living (figure 3). They are connected especially with urban street life and its illicit desires—vice, lust, crime, and sensual indulgence—and are represented as prostitutes, hustlers, conmen, cabaret girls, and others forced by circumstance to



FIGURE 3. Statues of various *exus*. Photo courtesy of Márcia Ines Alves.

live by their wits. Many practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions affectionately refer to them as *povo da rua*, or people of the street.⁴⁴

Given its eclecticism there is no one authoritative version of Umbanda cosmology, and it is difficult to point to a discrete set of beliefs or practices common to all practitioners. Nevertheless some general ideas seem to be shared widely. *Exus*, for example, constitute only one category of entities within a large and heterogeneous spirit universe that is sometimes arrayed along a hierarchical continuum from more “evolved” to less “evolved” spiritual planes. The most exalted of these spiritual planes is occupied by the Supreme Being, identified sometimes with the Christian God or with Olorun (or Olodumare), the Yoruba creator deity. Beneath it are a number of spiritual levels inhabited by an eclectic assortment of disincarnate beings who refer to diverse historical moments and represent social types prominent in folklore and collective memory. This myriad collection of spirit entities pays homage to mythic characters whose stories largely are excluded from official versions of Brazilian history but who remain continually present in the lives of Umbanda practitioners as sources of knowledge, healing, and affliction.

Umbanda systematizers often group these entities into different *falanges* (phalanxes) or *linhas* (lines), typically seven in number, each responsible for a particular aspect of existence. These entities range from

the “most evolved,” who rarely descend to the terrestrial realm (Jesus Christ, the spirits of European philosophers, popular Catholic saints, and the *orixás*), through a series of lesser-evolved entities (archetypal figures of Brazilian folk history such as *pretos velhos* and *caboclos*, said to be the spirits of elderly black slaves and indigenous Indians), lower-level entities like *exus* and *pomba giras* (the spirits of hustlers and prostitutes), and finally *eguns*, the generalized spirits of the dead.⁴⁵ Some Umbanda centers also recognize entities representing other marginal social types, among them *ciganos* (gypsies), *marinheiros* (sailors), *boiadeiros* (cowboys), and *cangaceiros* (rural bandits).⁴⁶

While the most evolved of these spirit beings exist in a dimension far removed from the human realm, those who occupy levels closer to the terrestrial world can be persuaded to work on behalf of humans, that is, to mystically intervene in human affairs. Some practitioners say that by helping human beings these entities evolve in the hierarchy of spiritual beings, eventually reaching the upper echelons. A main objective of Umbanda ritual is to mobilize this spiritual aid for the physical, financial, or romantic problems of participants. Spirit possession ceremonies open to the public are one of the ways those in need access the various supernatural entities recognized by Umbanda. In addition many Umbanda leaders offer private sessions with particular spirits as well as divination and other ritual services to clients seeking help with maladies that range from persistent misfortune and illness to domestic difficulties.

Practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions sometimes classify spirit entities according to two spheres of moral actuation: the “line of the right” and the “line of the left.” Spirits of the right are said to work only for good, that is, in ways that accord with dominant moral codes. This division includes the *orixás*, African-derived divinities associated with ancestral lineages, natural forces, and cultural activities, as well as two popular categories of Umbanda spirits: *pretos velhos* (spirits of elderly black slaves; figure 4) and *caboclos* (spirits of Brazil’s native inhabitants; figure 5).

While Umbanda adepts acknowledge the *orixás* with offerings of food, drink, flowers, and candles, many focus their ritual attention on *pretos velhos* and *caboclos*, who, because of their own difficult experiences while on earth, are thought to understand the sufferings of their human petitioners and to possess the spiritual resources to help them. Recalling a long gone and highly romanticized past, *pretos velhos* and *caboclos* return to the earth in periodic ceremonies during which, in-

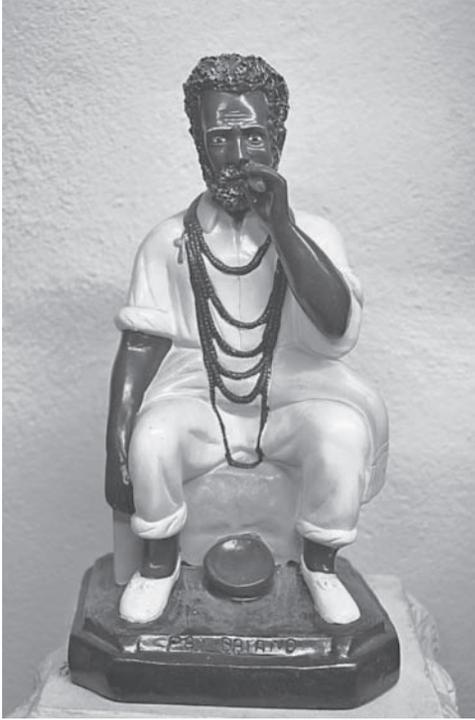


FIGURE 4. Statue of a *preto velho*. Photo courtesy of Márcia Ines Alves.

corporated in the body of a medium, they “consult” with petitioners and execute a variety of spiritual cures. *Pretos velhos* may also be consulted for domestic problems, as these spirits are known for their considerable life experience and insight into human nature, gained through their difficult lives of forced servitude.

Within this schema Pomba Gira and other *exu* spirits pertain to the “line of the left,” considered by some practitioners to be less “evolved” than *caboclo* and *preto velho* spirits. As entities connected to the cut-throat world of the street, they offer decisive action unfettered by considerations of domestic virtue, loyalty, or affection. In return for payment in the form of their favorite items, *exu* spirits are believed to execute any request. As a result they may be contracted to work for objectives perceived as morally suspect or even malevolent: material gain, personal advancement, vengeance, monopolization of another’s sexual attention or financial resources—pursuits condemned as black magic.



FIGURE 5. Statue of a *caboclo*.
Photo courtesy of
Márcia Ines Alves.

Despite the tendency of Umbanda codifiers to classify spirits and rituals into moral dichotomies of right and left, benevolent and malevolent (a central preoccupation in Umbanda literature and polemics, and one that reflects the ideological dominance of Christianity), such divisions are far less clear in practice. For example, some devotees claim that they appeal to *exu* spirits only to counteract the nefarious works of others or to “open pathways” obstructed by an enemy. Some who admit to working regularly with these spirits acknowledge that they may be employed in acts of black magic but seldom characterize them as intrinsically evil or bad, arguing that “the devil isn’t evil, it is humans who do evil.”⁴⁷ As Nazaré explained it, “Pomba Gira and the other *exus* are not evil themselves—it depends on what you ask of them. If you ask them to do ill then it is you yourself who intend evil.”

Petitioned for material, financial, or romantic success, to thwart an enemy, or as a defense against the malicious acts of others, *exu* spirits operate in difficult situations where the line between good and evil is hazy at best. Umbanda, while sharing Christianity’s dualistic vision of the universe

to some extent, also understands the human being as a totality, with all the attendant flaws, contradictions, frailties, and ambivalent emotions that characterize the human condition. From an analytical perspective, *exus* may be seen as embodiments of deeply human desires—above all those desires censured or at odds with a normative Christian moral order in which good and evil are ascribed to mutually exclusive domains—and as instruments through which humans attempt to realize those desires.

How people choose to deal with these spirits, whether they avoid them, expel them, attempt to indoctrinate them, or fully embrace them, also suggests how they channel their own ambivalent desires for love, sex, vengeance, success, or material possessions—the passionate, acquisitive side of human nature. Phrased in another way, *exu* spirits permit polysemic explorations of the moral dimensions of human desire and action, since for these spirits “no request is forbidden, no desire prohibited, no aspiration unattainable.” “It is as if,” Reginaldo Prandi observed of Pomba Gira, “there existed a world of happiness whose access she controls and governs, that is the exact opposite of the frustrating world of everyday reality.”⁴⁸

Whether cultivated as powerful allies or condemned as dangerous malefactors, *exu* spirits operate in the world as it is, not as human beings might wish it to be. In this sense they provide a way of understanding and dealing with civilization’s less salutary aspects; unlike more “evolved” Umbanda entities, the Holy Spirit, or other spiritual beings cultivated in Brazil, *exus* are at home in a world where consumption conveys status, the pursuit of wealth and power is lauded, and the gratification of individual desires trumps older ideals of cooperation and the collective good.

The contradictions between this system of values, so intrinsic to contemporary capitalist economies, and a more traditional system that places group welfare and mutual responsibility over the individual’s own interests can be particularly acute in low-income neighborhoods, where survival often depends on the sharing of limited resources and jobs are difficult to come by. Rituals dedicated to *exu* spirits speak to these contradictions, casting them into the world as concrete and thus subject to human action. Among a population for whom other means of influencing, altering, questioning, or protesting the conditions of their lives are largely unavailable or perceived as ineffective, *exus* represent a powerful means of objectifying diffuse social forces and articulating modes of thought and action more compatible with their circumstances.

So rather than seeing *exu* spirits as wholly nefarious, as many Afro-Brazilian practitioners do, I prefer to approach them as dramatic

embodiments of various contradictions at the heart of modern Brazil: the incongruities between capitalism's promise of a better life and the lived experiences of those whose labor is commodified and invested in the profit of others; conflicts between a rigidly dichotomous moral system of Christian teachings and the pragmatic problems of everyday life; tensions between a dominant morality that condemns female sexuality outside of marriage and simultaneously fetishizes women as erotic objects; and the discrepancies in a system that promises justice and equality for all but systematically fails to deliver them to the majority of the population. These are conflicts that permit no easy reconciliation since they rarely become the subject of conscious reflection, but their effects are lived out in dozens of ways in the course of daily life.

Regardless of how they might seek to temper these spirits, those who work with the *exus* consciously trade on the highly ambivalent reputation of these entities, staking their own social identity on their proximity to dangerous and potentially malignant forces. This can be a risky strategy, for it plays into ideologically dominant notions of good and evil, licit and illicit interactions with supernatural powers. As I argue in chapter 8, this can be seen as an example of what James Scott termed the "infrapolitics of the powerless,"⁴⁹ a means to enhance one's power in a social environment whose inhabitants routinely are seen as a threat to public order and morality. Rather than condemn *exus* and those who work with them as sorcerers, my goal has been to situate beliefs and practices related to these entities within the broader context of contemporary social dynamics in urban Brazil.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

In its content and structure this book makes extensive use of life history interviews and participant observation data from field research that I have been conducting in Rio de Janeiro since 2000. Because it combines elements of biography and ethnography, I think of it as akin to what Michael Herzfeld, in another context, termed an "ethnographic biography."⁵⁰ And yet if we take the word *biography* to be the primary subject of that designation and *ethnographic* to be its modifier, the book doesn't fit easily within the genre of biography, since I am not concerned with illuminating the character of a significant personality or exploring the trajectory of a fascinating life. Because of its close focus on a particular individual, neither is it a traditional ethnography, a form that, as Herzfeld

noted, typically explores social dynamics within a larger-scale social group.

Rather it is something in between: drawing from the biography and experiences of one woman, the book engages the larger question of how spiritual beliefs and practices are strategically employed by individuals, under what conditions, and with what consequences. For me what is interesting about Nazaré's experiences are what they reveal about the interface between an ordinary individual and a larger constellation of disembodied forces—social norms and expectations, religious constructs, economic pressures, and historical conditions particular to a specific time and place—and how these forces are expressed in and through Pomba Gira.

By situating my inquiry within the particularities of an individual life, my aim has been to provide an empathetic picture of how spiritual practices function in the everyday struggles for which human beings look to the supernatural for answers and assistance.⁵¹ At this level I do not see Nazaré's religious life as essentially different from that of a Christian who prays to God for guidance, discerns his will in the events of her life, or invokes his authority to justify her actions. Obviously the details of how the supernatural-human interaction is imagined and the mechanisms through which it is operationalized are very different in each case. Many readers may find the beliefs and practices that I describe unusual, even bizarre. Others may find their assumptions about what constitutes religion challenged. This is to be expected if, as David Chidester observed, "one of the responsibilities of the academic study of religion is to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange."⁵²

Beyond making the strange familiar, in showing how claims about the supernatural both emerge from and exist in a constant dialogue with the mundane events of everyday life I hope to shift our attention away from religion as a set of more or less institutionalized discourses and practices that exist apart from individuals, to the myriad ways individuals employ these discourses and practices in the course of confronting life's varied challenges, an approach that has been called "lived religion."⁵³ From this perspective religion is neither the sum of its codified forms (institutions, theological traditions, sacred texts) nor some unmediated and qualitatively unique experience (of the "sacred," "holy," "wholly other," and so forth), but is situated at the encounter of individual and society, squarely amid the mundane concerns of life. "Lived religion," as Robert Orsi observed, "cannot be separated from other practices of

everyday life, from the ways that humans do other necessary and important things, or from other cultural structures and discourses (legal, political, medical, and so on).”⁵⁴

Informed by this way of looking at religion, the book is divided into four sections, each addressing the specific junctures of self and society that are relevant for my analysis. Part I, comprising this chapter and the next, introduces the book’s main themes and arguments in a preliminary way. In chapter 2 I consider the figure of Pomba Gira in more depth, sketching for the reader what in Brazil is widely disseminated knowledge about her distinctive attributes and proclivities, information that is part of a shared world of meanings inherited by Afro-Brazilian religious practitioners like Nazaré. After discussing representative examples from an open-ended corpus of popular stories, songs, and images of Pomba Gira, I conclude with a description of my own first encounter with Pomba Gira as ritually incarnated, the same occasion at which I met Nazaré for the first time.

Part II (chapters 3 and 4) moves from Pomba Gira to the social terrain within which this entity operates and the characteristic tensions to which she speaks. Where chapter 2 situates the figure of Pomba Gira within a culturally specific religious imagination, chapters 3 and 4 turn to the social aspects of Nazaré’s world; they chart the material conditions and normative structures that shape daily life in the urban neighborhoods where Pomba Gira is most popular. Following Janice Boddy’s approach in her classic ethnography *Wombs and Alien Spirits*, I think that the characteristic behaviors, proclivities, and powers of Afro-Brazilian spirit entities are usefully understood as a refraction of the human realm that speaks about it in a variety of subtle, and not so subtle, ways.⁵⁵ Because it is important to understand the relevant social landscape before delving further into the specifics of Nazaré’s relationship with Pomba Gira, in these chapters discussion of Pomba Gira and Afro-Brazilian religions in general temporarily drops away.

To give the reader a more nuanced understanding of the realities of daily life on the urban periphery, chapter 3 explains the history of Rio’s *favelas*, or shantytowns, and the physical and symbolic characteristics that mark these areas, and their inhabitants, as socially marginal and morally suspect. Chapter 4 continues this discussion by examining prosaic conventions of gender, sexuality, and morality, conflicts regarding which may be said to constitute Pomba Gira’s special area of actuation. Here I focus my attention particularly on what are otherwise implicit

notions of personhood and propriety that are constituted and continually reinforced by daily experience.

Having laid this groundwork, I turn in subsequent chapters from the social dynamics in Rio's urban periphery to the more intimate sphere of individual experiences and draw heavily on oral interviews and other ethnographic data obtained over the course of several years and in the context of ongoing conversations with Nazaré, her husband, Nilmar, and her biological and spiritual "children," as well as participant-observation in Nazaré's ritual and day-to-day life. Part III (chapters 5, 6, and 7) focuses on discourse about Pomba Gira and is structured around various examples of Nazaré's spirit narratives. Chapters 5 and 6 incorporate material from a series of life history interviews to chart Nazaré's developing relationship with the Afro-Brazilian spirit world based on her own and Nilmar's retrospective accounts. These chapters discuss Nazaré's early experiences of behavioral disturbances, eventually determined to be of spiritual origin, and follow her increasing participation in different Afro-Brazilian cult groups leading to her present-day role as a *zelador*, one who serves the spirits.⁵⁶

In chapter 7 I examine the internal logic of Pomba Gira discourse, analyzing a story that Nazaré narrated about Maria Molambo's deadly vengeance on Nilmar. My analysis of Nazaré's story and its impact on her marriage develops many of the themes that emerge in previous chapters, underscoring the connections between Pomba Gira and male-female relations, marital conflict, betrayal, and ambivalent desires. Taken together, the chapters in part III pursue two interrelated analytic projects: an examination of Pomba Gira discourse as a kind of dialogue with normative ideals—of morality and femininity in particular—and the license and limits of this dialogue, and how this dialogue affects and is affected by the labile state of intimate relations within the family, especially those between husband and wife.

Part IV (chapters 8 and 9) moves from stories about Pomba Gira to the ritual practices by which this entity is invoked and through which she is believed to interact with clients and admirers. Chapter 8 discusses the distinctive *trabalhos*, or ritual works, that mobilize Pomba Gira to intervene in the human world on behalf of a petitioner. Involving intricate assemblages of objects, materials, and symbols particular to the situation at hand, these ritual works symbolize social forces and hidden desires—jealousy, rivalry, retribution, or ambition—whose occult operations are believed to directly affect an individual's life. Conceptualized as exchanges

with the spirit, these works articulate a specific vision of the contemporary world and function as part of an alternative moral economy.

In chapter 9 I examine the economic aspects of Nazaré's spiritual work with Pomba Gira in more detail, considering the constant balance that a *zelador* must strike between the demands of clients and those of her family. My analysis in this chapter pulls together some of the themes that run through previous chapters. In an effort to better reflect the ongoing, open-ended nature of Nazaré's engagement with Pomba Gira and other spirits, however, I deliberately have refrained from imposing an overly systematized conclusion that connects all of the diverse points that I make.

Inevitably such a close focus on the spiritual life of one individual means that many aspects of Afro-Brazilian traditions go unexplored within these pages or remain part of a colorful but hazy backdrop. Devotions to the *orixás* and other supernatural beings, for example, are virtually absent from my discussion, though such practices are important for many Afro-Brazilian adepts. Compared to Pomba Gira, these entities play a lesser role in Nazaré's life story and contemporary healing work, and as a result they hover in the background of my analysis. Nor do I talk about the complex pharmacopoeia shared by all Afro-Brazilian religions that is itself an important source of healing knowledge and authority.⁵⁷

Similarly although I address the issue of race (and racism) in Brazil at various points, it does not receive the level of sustained attention and careful analysis that other classificatory taxa, such as gender and class, do. Partly this is because race did not surface as a major issue in Nazaré's spiritual and daily life in the same way that dynamics of gender and class did, although race may be extremely significant for other devotees. Race in Brazil is a notoriously fraught and complex subject that, in itself, could well fill a volume, and my reticence should not be taken to mean that skin color does not intersect with gender and class in ways that reinforce patterns of social inequality, or that racialized prejudices are absent from Afro-Brazilian religions. Readers interested in these issues will find a body of literature in Portuguese and English that offers the kind of sustained analysis not possible here.⁵⁸

The choices that we make as analysts inevitably mean that certain aspects of the social field come into sharper focus while others recede. In choosing to focus on Pomba Gira I have bracketed Nazaré's engagement with other spirits who, in conjunction with that entity, also played supporting roles at different moments in her life.⁵⁹ Although Nazaré's

appeals to Pomba Gira are, broadly speaking, representative, each devotee's relationship with this entity takes form in the context of that person's unique biography. Afro-Brazilian spirit entities are highly condensed, polysemic, and collective representations with whom people interact in multiple ways, bringing their own problems and desires. Sustained attention to the specifics of another individual's life might well highlight features of Pomba Gira that remain peripheral in my account because they were not salient for Nazaré. For example, this spirit often is associated with sexual compulsions, exhibitionism, or other erotic behavior that defies prevailing social norms.⁶⁰

Given the complexities of meaning, motivations, power relations, desires, and other factors at play in any aspect of social life, it is important to remember that my analysis is provisional and partial. While Nazaré's case suggests how appeals to Pomba Gira can open up alternative possibilities of action and interpretation, my analysis should not be taken as evidence that an individual's claims about the spirit are always efficacious, successful, or accepted as legitimate, or that incidents of possession regularly empower the possessed. Spirit possession is a complex phenomenon that serves multiple psychological, social, and pragmatic functions and is capable of generating multiple interpretations among the social actors involved. As Boddy aptly observed, "[Spirit] possession has numerous significances and countless implications: it defies simple explanation. It has no necessary cause, no necessary outcome. Its province is meaning, and it is best addressed in that light."⁶¹ The interpretations that I propose therefore should not be seen as exhausting Pomba Gira's potential range of meanings. Nevertheless I am persuaded that Nazaré's case illustrates some of the principal social dynamics to which this spirit speaks and the complicated and often paradoxical role that she plays in the lives of her devotees.

FIELDWORK, NARRATIVES, AND THE ACT OF NARRATION

When I met her in 2000 Nazaré had built a reputation in her neighborhood as a dedicated *zelador* and an effective spirit healer, a fact that allowed her to maintain a small group of adherents who met collectively for rituals of various kinds. Because she drew freely from her own experiences with different religious communities, Nazaré presided over what is sometimes called a *casa traçada*, or crossed house, that is, a community that combines ritual practices and entities typically associated with

Candomblé with those typically associated with Umbanda. Such crossed houses are not unusual and are an important reminder that the realities of religious practice continually confound our efforts to classify them.

The regular schedule at her *terreiro* (ritual center) included bimonthly *toques*, sessions in which various spirits were ritually summoned with drum, song, and dance, as well as *festas*, more elaborate celebrations held in honor of specific spirit entities.⁶² These *festas* occurred on specific dates and attracted anywhere from twenty to a hundred people, including participants and spectators. In most cases they were preceded by private rituals in which animals, usually small fowl and goats, were ceremonially sacrificed in order to “feed” the spirit being feted. Over the course of a year Nazaré might hold half a dozen of these large-scale, public *festas*, punctuated by smaller *toques*, which were also open to the public. In addition to these collective rituals, Nazaré offered an array of private *trabalhos*, including divination readings, herbal treatments, purifications, and spiritual fortifications, to clients seeking her spiritual assistance. She also conducted lengthy rites of initiation modeled on those found in Candomblé *terreiros*, a process referred to as *feitura de santo* (“making the saint”), *assentar o santo* (“seating the saint”), or *raspagem do santo* (“shaving the saint,” a reference to the shaving of the initiate’s head during the rite).

While living in Brazil in 2000–2002 I attended all of Nazaré’s grand public *festas* and various smaller *toques* and private rituals, including the initiations of three people.⁶³ My custom was to arrive several hours early to observe the preparations and lend a hand when needed. In addition to these ceremonies, several times a week I visited with Nazaré and whoever happened to be at her *terreiro* that day. My regular and frequent presence offered opportunities for interviewing other community members and clients. Because Nazaré informed everyone that I was writing a book about her, these interviews felt forced in the beginning as my subjects, faced with such an important undertaking, became guarded and formal. With time these interviews became more relaxed and more informative.

In my initial interviews with Nazaré I attempted to elicit basic information about her childhood, family life, and early memories of spirit possession, since part of her self-presentation as a religious healer is based on the claim that she began receiving spirit entities at a very young age. I tried to pin her down on dates and as many other concrete details as I could, comparing these with others’ memories of the events that she had related, where possible. However, human memory is notoriously fickle and self-serving, so I was less concerned with the veracity of the events

that Nazaré recalled than with how she herself made them meaningful—and thus made herself meaningful—by imbuing them with mythological parallels drawn from the world of Afro-Brazilian spirits.

Early in the process Nazaré's tendency to wander away from what I considered straightforward questions into meandering stories frustrated me. Trying to understand these stories literally—that is, trying to abstract from them a transparent account of past events—left me baffled, for they often shifted abruptly back and forth in time, were highly repetitive, or featured improbable details. As I spent more time with Nazaré I began to perceive these stories as circular accounts that were not structured chronologically, as in a linear narrative, but in terms of repeated themes and patterns.⁶⁴

Once I became less focused on how her stories didn't answer (or even engage with) my questions and more attentive to their internal rhythms and symbolic language, I was better able to appreciate them as narrative acts of self-fashioning that imbued past events with mythological resonances even as they worked to constitute and reinforce a particular identity. All of Nazaré's narratives abounded with details significant within a larger religious framework. Like myths, many of these stories stretched credibility to its very limit, and I initially was surprised to find some of what I considered their more implausible aspects confirmed by others. Sorcery and enchantment are part of the fabric of everyday life in Brazil, and I came to see these stories as integral components of Nazaré's charismatic self-presentation, necessary for her religious work and perhaps for her psychic survival.

In the chapters that follow I try to present these stories in the manner and, where possible, in the voice in which they were narrated to me. This means that I am not concerned with interrogating the empirical validity of the claims that are made in the stories. Rather I am interested in how they function as part of a larger process of identity construction and signification in which the unpredictable actions of the spirits continually introduce new levels of meaning. The Afro-Brazilian spirit world is conceived as a parallel universe that is invisible to human beings yet contiguous with their world. Although spirits penetrate all facets and levels of human life, the reverse is not true: humans can never fully perceive the shadowy world that lies just beyond sensory awareness but can apprehend it only incompletely. The spirits who appeared in Nazaré's stories and those of other informants erupt into everyday life, transgressing the boundaries of spirit world and terrestrial world, constantly unsettling categories and presenting new possibilities for interpretation.

In my analysis I am most interested in the transformations that these interpretive possibilities facilitated for Nazaré and her clients.

When retelling people's stories I have tried to preserve as much as possible each individual's style and idiosyncrasies while translating their words into English, a language none of them spoke. In some chapters I draw heavily on material transcribed from lengthy interviews, and in others I use short excerpts or quotes to illustrate particular points of my argument. To avoid interrupting the narrative flow of long passages of transcribed material I have contained my editorial explanations to separate sections or footnotes. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Portuguese are my own.

Although I occasionally use the expression *spirit possession* to gloss the phenomenon that I am describing, this is not how practitioners themselves characterize their relationship with a tutelary spirit, and it carries certain connotations that may be misleading. In addition to the negative meaning that possession has in the context of Euro-American Christianity, the term also obscures, as Joan Dayan observed in the case of Vodou, the reciprocal nature of the relationship between spirit and *serviteur*, its constancy, and the gradual disciplined training of mind and body necessary for the temporary manifestation of the spirit to take place.⁶⁵ Practiced mediums like Nazaré describe this relationship in relational terms: they “work” with the spirit or “receive” it (*receber o santo*) as one would receive a guest. Manifestations of the spirit take place along a continuum of consciousness, and a medium may perceive the presence of a spirit in dreams, auditory or visual signs, bodily sensations, or other altered states, as well as during ritualized trance states. Mediums also communicate directly with spirits through divination, prayers, or other techniques. Once cultivated, the relationship between medium and spirit may last a lifetime and require considerable effort and expense on the part of the medium.

In the course of my research I observed different levels of engagement with the spirits, which I have tried to describe consistently and systematically throughout the book. For example, I make a distinction between *devotees* of Pomba Gira and *mediums*. Although my informants did not use these terms (or their equivalents in Portuguese), I have found them useful for the purpose of distinguishing and characterizing two different types of relationship with the spirit. In my usage devotees of Pomba Gira include those who actively cultivate an ongoing relationship with the spirit: maintaining a home altar, providing periodic offerings, and regularly attending ceremonies in which the spirit is made present in the bodies of

others. Devotees may also claim to receive messages from the spirit in dreams or through divination techniques.

I use the term *medium* to denote those devotees who, in addition to the activities just listed, also receive the spirit in possession rituals, thereby providing the material form through which Pomba Gira is made manifest in the human world. The difference between devotees and mediums is one of degree rather than kind; both of these terms indicate an ongoing relationship with the spirit that requires a certain level of commitment and is understood as mutually beneficial.

By contrast, I use the term *admirer* to indicate a person who maintains a more casual relationship with the spirit that does not involve regular offerings or other activities that mark a devotee's level of commitment. An admirer may consult the spirit on occasion, attend ceremonies, offer a gift or other form of homage, or petition a specific *trabalho* but otherwise does not maintain an ongoing ritual relationship with the spirit. I use the terms *follower* and *admirer* interchangeably. Finally, a *client* is a person who petitions a medium for help with a particular problem through the intermediary of the medium's spirits. A client's relationship with the medium and her spirits is occasional, pragmatic, and oriented toward the achievement of a specific goal.

In addition to the voices of my informants, I draw on a range of academic disciplines in constructing my analysis, incorporating the work of historians, anthropologists, sociologists, scholars of religion, political scientists, social activists, and policy analysts. As a result my narrative strategy is polyphonic; sometimes I rely heavily on the voices of my informants, building my analysis around their words, and at other times their voices recede into the background as sociological, historical, or theoretical issues come to the fore. Descriptive, first-person ethnographic vignettes are woven throughout the text, especially in chapters 2, 3, 8, and 9. These vignettes are "word paintings" intended to provide what novelists refer to as local color, but they also provide a contrapuntal narrative of my own experiences in the field.

RECIPROCITY, OBLIGATION, AND BETRAYAL: HIGHS AND LOWS IN THE LIFE OF A *ZELADOR*

In the years that I have known her, Nazaré has experienced both highs and lows in her religious and her personal life. When I first met her she was enjoying the high side: her center was doing well, she had a house full of regular members, and an affluent client, Seu Zé, provided substantial

work for her as well as access to a lifestyle to which she could otherwise only aspire. A year and a half before my arrival in Brazil Seu Zé had sought out Nazaré for help resolving a legal matter. As was her custom for problems involving finances or romance, Nazaré worked with her *pomba gira* spirits on Seu Zé's behalf, setting into motion a series of ritual works. When the case was finally resolved in his favor, Seu Zé became one of Nazaré's most important clients and a regular participant in the ritual life of her *terreiro*, one of the few regulars who came from outside the neighborhood or its immediate environs.

Despite her success in opening the judicial pathways for the resolution of Seu Zé's court case, Nazaré's relationship with him eventually soured, triggering a particularly low period. I returned from a brief trip to the United States in January 2001 to find that they had parted ways. I analyze these events and their aftermath in more detail in chapter 9, but for now it is enough to note that at issue was the ambiguously defined nature of reciprocity and mutual obligation.⁶⁶ Tellingly Nazaré and Seu Zé charged each other with exploitation, an accusation that signifies a rupture in the structure of relational reciprocity. From that point on Nazaré referred to Seu Zé as the person whose exploitation of her had been most egregious and whose "treachery" nearly ruined her.

As of my most recent visit, in 2008, Nazaré had been forced to cede the space that housed her *terreiro* to a daughter who, due to financial difficulties, had lost her own residence and now was living there with her husband and three small children. Lacking sufficient space, Nazaré was unable to hold regular collective ceremonies for the spirits or perform *trabalhos* for clients; instead she was earning money selling snacks, drinks, and homemade food from a converted garage in front of the building. It remains to be seen whether this setback has ended Nazaré's career as a *zelador* or simply provoked a temporary hiatus. She herself remains sanguine about the future, assuring me that she has needed a break for a long time. She still cares for her spirits, maintaining their altars and providing offerings on a reduced scale, but she does not regularly hold the public ceremonies in which, accompanied by the drumming and singing of the gathered faithful, the spirits are invited to manifest themselves in her physical form.

Nazaré's labile relationship with the spirits reminds us that religion is best approached not as some inner state—an orientation to a "sacred" or "ultimate reality" independent from everyday cares—but as a set of discursive and practical claims about the superhuman that are deeply embedded within the circumstances of human lives, a dynamic and on-

going endeavor that takes distinctive form in relationship to the individual's social position, gender, material circumstances, and interests, and that acts on that individual's world in pragmatic ways. At the same time that people inherit certain religious frameworks, as Robert Orsi noted, they also freely appropriate, invent, modify, and improvise in the course of meeting life's challenges.⁶⁷ This dynamic context of use, situated at the interface between a particular individual and the world in which she lives, is the subject of this book.

Pomba Gira and the Religious Imagination

[*Pomba giras*] are those women of the red light zone. . . . In earlier times they were lost women, women of the cabaret.

—Lísias Nogueira Negrão, *Entre a cruz e a encruzilhada*

Much sought by the marginalized and uneducated—the unemployed, transvestites, homosexuals, and prostitutes—*pomba giras* also are popular among politicians and professionals searching for success and wealth. . . . Suggestions for how to win over the person you desire, make a partner return in regret, or go away forever, or even how to capture a man using sex, comprise the repertory of these shameless entities. . . . In return for their romantic and sexual advice, they request presents, drinks, and offerings.

—Jane Fernandes and Éden Nilo, “*Maria Padilha é Pomba Gira*,” *Correio da Bahia*, April 3, 2004

SERENDIPITOUS ENCOUNTERS

I first encountered the notorious *Pomba Gira* on an expedition to the *Madureira* marketplace, a large, indoor bazaar in an outlying district of Rio de Janeiro whose merchants specialize in attending the ritual needs of Afro-Brazilian religious practitioners. As I wandered about the aisles of a shop, my attention was drawn to shelf after shelf of statues depicting a voluptuous female figure. There were dozens of variations on the basic model: one dressed in rags, another in the guise of a gypsy fortune teller, a third crowned in a tiara, a fourth brandishing a trident with a skull at her feet, even one that resembled a Brazilian Wonder Woman, complete with boots and cape (figure 6).



FIGURE 6. Pomba Gira of the Seven Crossroads. Photo courtesy of Márcia Ines Alves.

Notwithstanding these and other distinctions of wardrobe and accoutrements, it was clear that these female images shared a close family resemblance: all were portrayed predominantly in the colors of black and red, all in postures of come-hither defiance, feet planted firmly on the ground and chin held high. And unlike the Catholic religious statuary of creamy-skinned Madonnas and pale saints stocked on nearby shelves, nearly all of these *pomba giras* were brown-skinned *morenas* with long, black hair, attributes that made them look very much like most of the Brazilian women shopping at the mall that day.

Intrigued, I began to notice these feminine figures throughout the market. At some shops Pomba Gira appeared as the centerpiece of an altar, with offerings of red roses, perfume, coins, and small bottles of liquor arrayed at her feet (figure 7). Often a lit cigarette had been placed on the statue's base or gold trinkets arranged on wrists and neck. Sometimes the statue was adorned in petticoat skirts of red and black, her head crowned with a tiara. In all cases it was apparent that loving care had gone into these tableaux, for the flowers were fresh and the lit cigarettes



FIGURE 7. Large red Pomba Gira statue. Photo courtesy of Márcia Ines Alves.

replenished as they burned down. This ritual and aesthetic treatment of statuary is not unusual for religious practitioners of either Catholic or Afro-Brazilian persuasions, and similarly elaborate altars may be found in private and public places throughout Brazil. Metro stations in Rio, for example, have small statues of Catholic saints in glass cases charged with watching over passengers and ensuring their safe transit.

Displayed alongside the mass-produced statuary depicting various manifestations of Pomba Gira was an array of specialized products: soaps, perfumes, incense, costume jewelry, and other items whose packaging bore her name and likeness (figure 8). I later learned that these material objects are fundamental to the ritual exchanges through which devotees interact with this entity, for Pomba Gira must be persuaded to aid her human followers with gifts, most especially items that gratify her vanity or satisfy her vices: perfume, jewelry, red roses, sweet wine, cigarettes. Admirers like to say that if you don't treat her well, the feisty Pomba Gira will turn your life upside down. "It's like the domestication



FIGURE 8. Pomba Gira products.

of a pit bull,” said one, “if you know how to deal with her, she helps you, but if not, she can kill you.”¹

Recalling the nuns who had endeavored long ago to instill their punitive version of Catholic doctrine in my recalcitrant head, I got a secret thrill in my small purchase of a bar of soap, with its sexy devil-girl emblazoned on the front. I didn’t know it then, but the figure adorning what I purchased as an amusing trinket would become the center of my work in Brazil, the first transaction in a long and complex relationship. It is significant that this transaction was mediated by money and the hint of blasphemy and that it involved convoluted intersections of femininity, sexuality, and religious power.

My second encounter with Pomba Gira occurred under equally serendipitous circumstances, when a chance acquaintance invited me to attend a ceremony for the spirit on the outskirts of Rio. It was there that I met Nazaré, in whose physical form that evening’s guest of honor had materialized, an experience that I describe in more detail later in this chapter. My relationship with Nazaré developed in the course of subsequent visits, over tiny cups of strong, sweet coffee called *cafezinho* and

conversations squeezed in between telephone calls, restless children, and the everyday cycle of activities involved in Nazaré's work with the spirits.

Like any spiritual entrepreneur, Nazaré spends a significant portion of her time tending to the various human dramas that provide the *raison d'être* of such enterprises. Always on the lookout for new clients and adepts, she quickly integrated me into her community, presenting me to others as her honorary *filha-de-santo* ("child of the saint," i.e., spiritual novice) or, when seeking to impress, her biographer. Although it was not a deliberate methodological choice at the time, in retrospect it is fitting that I entered the community as a total stranger, unencumbered by previous social connections with any of its members. As far as they were concerned I was just another admirer of Pomba Gira, one of many drawn by Nazaré's boisterous and bewitching Maria Molambo, albeit one who came from farther away than most. Insofar as I regularly brought special gifts for the spirit—even, as my parting offering, the material for an extravagant birthday dress—I was a dutiful admirer. In a certain respect I still am, having devoted the past nine years to studying the Brazilian phenomenon known as Pomba Gira.

CONCEPTUALIZING POMBA GIRA

Because the world of Pomba Gira's followers is one in which the spirit's independent existence is taken for granted, or at least people speak and behave as if it were, I refer to Pomba Gira as a subject, using pronouns such as *she* and *her*. And because Pomba Gira is both singular and plural, I often switch between these two modes, as my informants did, for Pomba Gira is at once an archetypal category and an individualized incarnation of this general type. The fact that Pomba Gira has achieved the status of a folk figure, recognized by many Brazilians outside of the ritual sphere in which she is incarnated, further contributes to this taken-for-granted sense of empirical existence. Unlike her devotees, however, I do not understand Pomba Gira as an autonomous and self-sufficient being, but rather as an imaginative figure who concretizes otherwise subterranean ideas about gender and power, morality and desire, bringing them to the surface, where they are subject to reflection and manipulation. As a result my analysis focuses on the psychosocial dimension: the all-too-human relationships, rivalries, and longings dramatized within and by the phenomenon of Pomba Gira.

As is true for any supernatural entity, scholars have no access to Pomba Gira outside of the stories that people tell about her and the rituals in which she is incarnated. This does not mean, however, that narrative and ritual have no real-world effects. Indeed we humans make our lives meaningful through stories that allow us to organize and interpret events, discern significant patterns within the daily flux of existence, transmit our knowledge, reflect on our past, and orient our future in specific ways. Whether we call them myth or legend or history or fiction, whether they are conveyed in sacred texts or television serials, narratives can mobilize people's sentiments, persuading them to understand themselves and the world in certain ways and to act accordingly.² In this sense I understand Pomba Gira as a discursive figure invoked by individuals to organize, interpret, and understand their experiences, intervene in the world in which they live, or fashion an alternative identity. Whether or not she "actually" exists, Pomba Gira lives in the rituals and stories of her devotees, for whom she is a source of both succor and torment—and often both.

Like any other figure of religious devotion, Pomba Gira is the subject of a well-developed popular mythology, a diverse and open-ended repertoire of stories, songs, prayers, ritual formula, and other narrative forms through which devotees understand and interact with the spirit. Despite great variety, these narrative forms share a recurring set of themes that establish Pomba Gira's unique characteristics and skills and shape how devotees like Nazaré craft their own stories about this entity's role in their lives. While Pomba Gira may appear in multiple guises—as a gypsy with colorful, flowing skirts; as a coquette, cabaret girl, or streetwalker; or even as a queen adorned with a golden tiara—the spirit's most salient attribute is her seductive allure. So although she takes material form in a variety of more or less individualized types, Pomba Gira is invariably a woman of ill repute, sometimes a prostitute or courtesan, sometimes a dangerous enchantress or *feiticeira*.

FEITICEIRAS AND WICKED WOMEN

When only a small child
 She was left at the door of the cabaret
 Little girl, go home
 This place is not for children
 Here only women enter

Look, I am not a child
 Look, I am a woman of the street.

Pomba Gira is a woman with seven husbands
 Don't mess with her
 That girl is dangerous.³

In dozens of *pontos cantados*, colorful, pithy songs that both honor and summon Afro-Brazilian spirit entities to the human world, Pomba Gira is portrayed as a woman of easy virtue, the lover of many men who is bound by none. Sexually independent and (usually) childless, she represents the antithesis of the domestic, maternal female. Some lyrics describe her as a home wrecker, luring men away from their chaste and dutiful wives. Others refer to her many husbands, frequently enumerated in multiples of seven. Typically she appears in these songs as a whore or a high-class courtesan; sometimes she is described as haunting the door of the cabaret, the real-life locale where ladies of the night plied their trade in Rio de Janeiro during the bohemian years of the early twentieth century. With their vivid images of debauchery and illicit pleasures, *pontos cantados*, despite their characteristic verbal economy, conjure a decadent underworld in which Pomba Gira reigns as Mistress of the Night.

While *pontos cantados* are a prevalent medium, more expansive, pseudo-biographical stories about Pomba Gira also circulate in oral and written forms. Thanks to a flourishing publishing industry and, more recently, the Internet, one may find dozens of accounts aimed at a popular audience that purport to describe the life histories of various spirit entities during their time on earth. Authors of such accounts sometimes claim to have received their information from the entity itself through such spiritualist techniques as automatic writing or channeling. In these longer, quasi-historical narratives, similar themes of feminine waywardness emerge.

The story of Maria Molambo (Raggedy Maria) is a typical example. Although individual versions differ in their details, all recount the operatic drama of an elite woman forced into prostitution by a reversal of fortune. In the story's most basic form, Maria Molambo was the daughter of a wealthy landowner who fell hopelessly in love with a young man against her father's will. Learning of his daughter's affair, the landowner arranged for her to marry a husband of his own choosing. The girl and her lover ran off, were persecuted relentlessly, and eventually were captured. To restore his name and honor the father disowned his



FIGURE 9. Statue of Maria Molambo.

daughter and ordered his henchmen to kill her lover. With nowhere to go, Maria Molambo was forced to live on the streets, prostituting herself to survive. Some variants describe how she struggled to raise a small daughter, the product of her tragic romance, who eventually succumbed to a fatal case of tuberculosis (or smallpox). Others add a coda to the story in which Molambo, upon the death of her father, inherited his estate, but preferring to live the life of a humble beggar, dedicated her life and wealth to helping others.⁴ Referencing her poverty (self-chosen or not), statues, songs, and images of Maria Molambo typically depict her dressed in rags or, as in these *pontos cantados*, inhabiting dark and desolate areas (figure 9):

By what dark road
Does that girl come
Dressed in cheap cotton rags
Her bones popping
One by one?⁵

Who is that girl
Whose creaky bones

Come popping?
 It's Maria Molambo
 Who lives at the bottom of the well.⁶

Because of these associations, deserted street corners and rubbish dumps are favored sites for devotees to place *despachos*, or petitionary offerings, for Molambo's favors.

Like all narratives about Pomba Gira, Molambo's conveys socially resonant messages about gender, sexuality, morality, and female agency. Its darker aspects suggest the vulnerability of those women who, by circumstance or choice, defy their assigned place in a world governed by male authorities. In rejecting the marriage arranged by her father for a lover of her own choosing, Maria Molambo rejects the patriarchal system and the life of sheltered domesticity that it represents. In the logic of the story the punishment for such rejection is prostitution and suffering. With neither father nor husband to protect and provide for her, Molambo can only become a *mulher sem dono*, a woman without an owner, that is, a prostitute. It is only by dedicating herself to selflessly helping others that she can reclaim her moral stature.

Stories about Maria Padilha, another well-known incarnation of Pomba Gira, emphasize the seductive side of female sexuality and the dangers it poses to men. Versions of Maria Padilha's story vary; in some she is a streetwalking prostitute, in others an influential Spanish queen or courtesan. But always Padilha is an irresistible *feiticeira*, or enchantress, who uses her erotic charms to take advantage of men. Several of the details of her story may have historical referents that go back to medieval Iberia. Researching popular religious practices in colonial Brazil, the historian Laura de Mello e Souza found magical incantations invoking "Dona Maria Padilha and all her company" in legal proceedings against women accused of sorcery by the Portuguese Inquisition and exiled to Portugal's colonial possessions. Such formulaic incantations, which often invoked Jesus, Barabbas, Satan, St. Peter, and other popular figures of Iberian Catholicism along with Dona Maria Padilha, accompanied diverse magical practices, including rituals of love magic intended to bring back a wayward spouse or ensure a lover's interest.⁷

Drawing on de Mello e Souza's findings, the Brazilian scholar Marylese Meyer conjectured that the Maria Padilha of these incantations was a reference to the Spanish noblewoman Doña Maria de Padilla, infamous in medieval balladry for bewitching the fourteenth-century king of Castile, Don Pedro I, away from his virginal and lawful spouse, Blanca de

Bourbon.⁸ Preserved in Spanish *romanceros* (collections of narrative poetry), popular lore, and folk religious practice, the memory of Maria de Padilla as a powerful *feiticeira* was passed down through the ages. According to Meyer, the connections forged between the folk character Maria de Padilla and women's love magic most likely spread from Spain to Portugal and thence, with victims of the Inquisition, to the Portuguese colonies of Angola and Brazil.⁹ Contemporary statues and images of the *pomba gira* Maria Padilha (the Portuguese spelling of Padilla) evoke this association by picturing her with a golden tiara, while some *pontos cantados*, like the ones below, add poetic embellishments to the basic story:

I'll tell a tale of a poor Maria
 Who knew luxury and agony.
 I'll tell the legend of Maria Padilha
 Who hid seduction under her *mantilha* [veil].
 She lived in the fourteenth century,
 A time of magic, mysticism, and fantasy.
 She was born in valiant Spain
 Formidable and marvelous.¹⁰

It was a crystal ball that she requested
 It was a crystal ball that she desired.
 It was there at the royal palace
 That Padilha would divine with her tarot cards and crystal ball.¹¹

In Brazil this entity is called upon especially for works of love magic: attracting a lover and ensuring his fidelity, reversing impotence. The complex arena of sexual desire is Maria Padilha's characteristic field of action.

With a standard plotline that revolves around women's ability to beguile men, stories about Maria Padilha embody dominant notions of female sexuality as both alluring and perilous. Like the tales of Maria Molambo (elements of whose story often are merged with Padilha's), these stories associate women's agency with their sexuality. The central trait that both Marias share is that, unlike the "proper" woman whose sexuality is controlled by father or husband, these figures defy this patriarchal system and its accompanying norms of feminine respectability.

Because these norms are predicated on channeling a woman's sexuality in ways that maintain a gendered hierarchy, female defiance is conceptualized in erotic terms as a dangerous sexuality that threatens the familial, social, or moral order. Hence the power of Pomba Gira is

characterized most often as an ability to seduce, beguile, or enchant, a particularly feminine use of power twisted to “immoral” ends. It is the dangerous intractability of female sexuality when divorced from its reproductive, maternal aspects that is central to the mythology of Pomba Gira. She represents behaviors and desires that are common but negatively valued, the underside of a traditionally Catholic code of social mores that extols feminine virtue, fidelity, and maternal respectability. Reinforced by a conservative, evangelical Protestant movement that has burgeoned in Brazil since the 1970s, these traditional ideals continue to be prevalent among Brazilians of various social strata.¹²

The mythology of Pomba Gira also draws symbolic resonance from another set of discourses and images about female sexuality that circulate in contemporary Brazil: the enduring trope of the Brazilian woman (and particularly the *mulata*, or mixed-race woman) as the embodiment of tropical sensuality and feminine allure.¹³ A male devotee I met in a store selling Afro-Brazilian religious paraphernalia articulated a sentiment I heard time and again: whether crowned by a tiara or dressed in cheap cotton rags, Pomba Gira “brings all the sensuality, femininity, and passion particular to Brazilian women.” To illustrate, he pointed to a shelf full of bare-breasted Pomba Gira statuary. Such representations don’t mean that the women who incorporate her go topless, he assured me, but rather convey this entity’s erotically charged sensuality.

Bare-breasted or not, Pomba Gira customarily is portrayed as a voluptuous, brown-skinned *mulata* or *morena* or, less frequently, an equally voluptuous light-skinned blonde.¹⁴ I never saw a statue, image, or any other representation of a black Pomba Gira, even though I met black women who received this spirit in possession rituals. Despite Brazil’s reputation as a racial democracy, African-associated physical traits, such as kinky hair, very dark skin, and broad facial features, generally are considered unattractive.¹⁵ With her loose hair, curvy figure, narrow features, and white or brown skin, Pomba Gira epitomizes normative standards of feminine beauty.

Pomba Gira’s sensuality, much remarked upon by men and women alike, extends to her mediums, who, in incorporating the spirit, must convey her distinctive physicality: “[Pomba Gira] is magnetic, charged with sensuality and *alegria* [happiness or vivacity], so much so that her arrival in the body of a medium is always exuberant, uninhibited, and sensual,” wrote one admirer on an Internet site devoted to discussions about Umbanda.¹⁶ No matter how celebrated, however, this uninhibited sensuality can be dangerous, and Pomba Gira’s mediums must carefully

manage the community's perception of the boundaries between themselves and the spirit, lest the latter's more excessive traits compromise their own reputation. Continually emphasizing their identity as faithful housewives and mothers is one way that women establish and maintain the boundaries between their own reputation and that of Pomba Gira.

Not surprisingly, sexual exhibitionism or other behavior considered inappropriate for a proper wife and mother may be interpreted as a sign of Pomba Gira's influence. "Maria Padilha almost led me into prostitution," Rose, one of Nazaré's *filhas-de-santo* and the mother of three, affirmed to me. "Because of her I almost became a prostitute. She took over my body. She would put me in these places and when I came to [myself], I said 'No, no, this isn't possible,' and really I was there. . . . She put various men after me, it was crazy. I would go somewhere, a party or something, and I felt like a prostitute because the men only had eyes for me." Rose explained the problem: "[Maria Padilha] *ficou de frente* [came to the forefront] and she began to influence me." As a result, Rose "drank too much": "I ended up in places that had nothing to do with me, places I had no business entering, that didn't have a family atmosphere." She reported that life began to return to normal after Nazaré "made a treatment and put [Padilha] in the rear because *exu* can't be in the front of you." Padilha only "stopped bothering" her altogether after Rose began to cultivate the spirit with offerings and learned how to incorporate her in possession ceremonies.¹⁷

DEMONIC AND DEADLY

Although the danger posed by Pomba Gira is coded primarily as sexual, also it is represented in song and imagery as a nefarious association with a demonic realm. The demonic potential of female sexuality has been a special source of concern for Catholic theologians since the medieval period and permeated the folk Catholicism brought to Brazil with Portuguese settlers. Long a dominant social and political force in Brazilian life, the Church and its iconography of evil have strongly influenced depictions of Pomba Gira. Statues, for instance, often portray her with flames dancing at her feet, as if emerging from the depths of hell (figure 10). Her connection to Lucifer or Satan is a popular theme in *pontos cantados*, as in the following:

The door of hell shuddered,
The people ran to see who was there.



FIGURE 10. Statue of Pomba Gira with flames. Photo courtesy of Márcia Ines Alves.

I heard a laugh at the crossroads,
It was Pomba Gira, the wife of Lucifer.¹⁸

Padilha,
Sovereign of the street and
Queen of the crossroads.
She is the wife of Lucifer.¹⁹

Maria Molambo is a queen
Crowned by Lucifer.²⁰

As Lucifer’s wife or consort, Pomba Gira represents the quintessential wicked woman, the femme fatale capable (whether petitioned to do so or not) of provoking the demise of those who incur her wrath:

You will end at the grave.
Don’t mess with her, no.
For she’s the point of the needle.

Whoever messes with Pomba Gira
ends at the grave.²¹

Among practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions, sudden or suspicious deaths may be attributed to the authorship of a powerful *pomba gira* spirit summoned for that purpose by an enemy of the victim. In this death-dealing guise, Pomba Gira represents the subversive force of Satan himself, as in the following *ponto cantado*:

Satan, Satan, I want to see Satan.
Pomba Gira is Satan.
I want to see she who can kill.

Other *pontos cantados* signal Pomba Gira's connection to death by referencing the cemetery, which serves both as her residence and as a locale for the ritual *despachos* (offerings) necessary for her favors:

The cemetery is a beautiful plaza
but no one wants to pass by.
Pomba Gira lives there
lives there, lives there
Pomba Gira lives there.²²

The topography of death furnishes an evocative array of names for specific manifestations of Pomba Gira: Maria Molambo of the Seven Catacombs, Pomba Gira of the Graveyard, Pomba Gira of the Souls, and Queen of the Cemetery.²³ Statuary depicting these entities feature coffins, gravestones, and skulls (figure 11).

In addition to cemeteries, references to crossroads and the hour of midnight recur frequently in *pontos cantados*. In these liminal zones that both connect and demarcate the spaces in which humans compartmentalize the world—where directions converge, day turns to night, and the world of the living encounters that of the dead—Pomba Gira materializes:

It's midnight,
the moon hides itself.
There at the crossroads
with her distinctive cackle,
Pomba Gira appeared.²⁴

Pomba Gira of the cemetery
And also of the crossroads.



FIGURE 11. Statue of Pomba Gira on a coffin. Photo courtesy of Márcia Ines Alves.

I want to see Pomba Gira, I want to see [her].
I want to see my queen there at the crossroads.²⁵

The crossroads hints at the African roots of Pomba Gira's family tree. Some scholars have suggested that the term *Pomba Gira* is a corruption of Bombojira (alternatively Bombonjira, Bongbogirá, Bombogira), a Central African deity, and an entity similar to the one I have described is venerated by this name in some contemporary communities.²⁶ More commonly, however, devotees describe Pomba Gira as the female consort or form of Exu, originally brought to Brazil by West African slaves.²⁷

Like both his African antecedent and his New World counterparts Legba and Elegguá in Haiti and Cuba, the Brazilian Exu is closely connected with trickery, subversion, and transgression and is often represented as a devilish character who delights in turning the world upside down. He is associated with liminal spaces as spatially and socially construed and is said to inhabit thresholds, cemeteries, crossroads, markets, and other places of exchange. As a result Exu frequently is addressed

as “the one who opens the pathways.” Like the Cuban Elegguá, his colors are red and black. Statues and images in Brazil sometimes depict Exu with a huge phallus, recalling an ancient connection to fertility but also a sexual potency that exceeds social boundaries and limits.²⁸ This association with an excessive or immoderate sexuality also defines his female counterpart, Pomba Gira, who is found only in Brazil.²⁹

POVO DA RUA

Exu is one of the hardest working entities there is in the spirit world, because the exu is a peon, you see? In business you have the owner, the president, the vice president, the manager, and so on, on through the division of responsibilities until you reach the peon. And without the peon nothing happens because if there is no peon there is no construction, no building.³⁰

Recalling the “anonymous masses who circulate through the city, the workers and common people who occupy public space,”³¹ *povo da rua* means “people of the street.” Roberto DaMatta famously observed that a fundamental and formative dichotomy in Brazilian culture is that between the domestic sphere of the home and the public sphere of the street, the world of the *casa* and that of the *rua*, each with its distinctive ethos.³² The *casa* represents the domestic virtues of the family, with its ties of affection, loyalty, and mutual dependence. Powerfully associated with women and children, the domestic space of the *casa* is a locus of feminine power. The *rua*, by contrast, is a markedly masculine space where individuals compete for dominance. Governed by the laws of consumption and desire, the *rua* exemplifies an impersonal world of exchange populated by thieves, hustlers, prostitutes, and other outlaw figures.

Though it should not be taken too literally, DaMatta’s conceptualization of the *casa* and *rua* offers a useful description of two distinct models of sociality that practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions often draw upon to describe their relationship with the spirit world. Spirits pertaining to the familiar world of the *casa*, such as *orixás* and *pretos velhos*, are affectionately referred to using parental terms like father, mother, or grandparent. Relationships between these spirits and their devotees involve metaphors of domestic nurturance and are conceived as mutually beneficial exchanges between respected and powerful elders and their obedient dependents.³³ Like the idealized image of a parent, *orixás* and *pretos velhos* are envisaged as loyal, patient, forbearing, and slow to anger. They may chastise their “children,” but the punishment is rarely harsh, and their requests can be put off by the promise to fulfill them at a later

time. However, the same qualities of lenience and forbearance make these spirits slow to work, and they may even refuse particular requests made of them.

Spirits of the street, by contrast, are fast, potent spirits. “*Exus*, Pomba Gira, they work much faster,” a member of Nazaré’s community told me, “and the *orixás* are slower. With *exus* we can converse, like I am talking with you. And with the *orixá*, no. . . . So it becomes more difficult.” Relationships with these spirits are structured as contractual exchanges around specific tasks; a devotee’s petition is always accompanied by payment in the form of the requisite offerings, which include alcohol, cigarettes, and other purchased items. Here the world of capitalism and contract labor, where social relations are mediated by commodity-based transactions, provides the primary symbolism for the relationship between human supplicant and spirit entity. So where a devotee’s relationship with an *orixá* or *preto velho* spirit is understood to be structured by ties of love and reciprocal commitment, signaled by the familiar terms of mother, father, or grandparent used to address the spirit, the relationship with Pomba Gira and other *exu* spirits references a different form of social interaction: the commodified and often morally ambivalent transactions associated with the world of the street.

Although some people do develop long-term relationships with *exu* spirits and cultivate them with regular offerings, many more seek them out for one-time transactions, for, like a contract laborer or peon, the *povo da rua* cannot refuse to attend a supplicant’s petition if it is accompanied by the appropriate offerings. However, great care must be taken in any interaction with these entities, for they can be dangerous if offended or neglected. “They can turn on you,” Nazaré confirmed, “because *exus* are like a blade with two edges. They can work for good and they can work for evil. They can help you as much as hinder you.” For that reason, devotees “always try to do right by them.” Volatile and avaricious, but also powerfully effective, *povo da rua* embody the multiple qualities associated with the world of the street.³⁴

More than a zone of commoditized relationships, the street is also a place of immorality and criminality populated by prostitutes and pimps, petty thieves and drug dealers. From the *cigana* (gypsy woman) to the *malandro* (rogue or ne’er-do-well), the *povo da rua* encompass some of the different character types associated with the street.³⁵ In a consciously elaborated display of symbolic subversion that plays on bourgeois stereotypes of the dissolute lower classes, male *exu* spirits embody masculine swagger and lawlessness, while their female counterparts epitomize

a flamboyant defiance that stands in stark contrast to idealized images of the domesticated wife or chaste daughter. These spirits of the street may have more or less elaborated personalities and stories associated with them; some, like Maria Molambo, have achieved widespread popularity, while others are unique to a particular community or region. Always they represent well-known social types—stereotypical characters—encountered both in folk memory and in daily life.

Many of the distinctive attributes ascribed to the *povo da rua* in song and imagery reference the social world of early twentieth-century Rio, recalling the prostitutes, conmen, samba musicians, and *malandros* (rogues) who frequented the city's bohemian and red-light districts. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed pervasive transformations in the economic, social, and physical structures of the city. As the nation's second capital and an important economic center, Rio saw an influx of former slaves and migrants seeking work in its busy port district and expanding industrial belt, particularly after the final abolition of slavery in 1888 and again in the aftermath of the worldwide economic depression of the 1920s. In the city's crowded cobblestone streets and narrow alleyways an informal and often extralegal economy flourished, comprising day laborers, itinerant peddlers, petty thieves, gamblers, samba musicians, prostitutes, *capoeiristas*,³⁶ and other socially marginal members of a burgeoning lower class. These figures exemplified a lifestyle at odds with elite notions of civility, embodied perhaps most succinctly by the slogan "Order and Progress" emblazoned on the Brazilian flag that was adopted by the newly formed Republican government in 1889.

The popular folk character known as Zé Pulintra (sometimes spelled Pelintra) embodies many of the values of this street culture. A beloved entity in Umbanda, Zé Pulintra, with his white suit and hat and red tie, represents the quintessential *malandro*, a figure closely associated with the bohemian life of Rio in the 1930s and 1940s (figure 12).³⁷ Known for his sartorial style, seductive charm, and street savvy, the *malandro* avoids legitimate work, preferring to use his wit and—all else failing—ruthlessness to get by. The following *ponto cantado* conveys something of his roguish ways:

Every morning
 When I descend the *ladeira* [steeply inclined street]
 People think
 That I am going to work.
 I put my kerchief



FIGURE 12. Statue of Zé Pilintra. Photo courtesy of Márcia Ines Alves.

Around my throat
Put my pack of cards in my pocket
And go to the Barão de Mauá [a neighborhood in Rio's port zone].
Work, work for what?
If I work
I will die.³⁸

While Zé Pilintra and other *povo da rua* may reference the social setting and historical period within which Umbanda first consolidated, these entities are more than just a romanticized depiction of the past. Indeed the characteristics associated with them deeply resonate with their admirers. Even as songs and stories dedicated to the *povo da rua* emphasize their rejection of elite culture's vision of productive work, devotees appreciate and often reference their ability to get things done. They are hard-working spirits, but they follow a different code of values, one that reflects the world as seen from the perspective of an urbanized underclass with little investment in the conventions and proprieties of bourgeois life.

THE VIEW FROM THE UNDERSIDE

Although much beloved by their devotees, *exus* and other *povo da rua* are a contentious topic in Afro-Brazilian religious circles, and opinions vary about the wisdom and desirability of cultivating such disreputable characters.³⁹ Those who work with these entities rarely deny their unsavory characteristics; instead they reinterpret them. *Exus*, they contend, inhabit a universe outside of humanity's limited notions of good and evil. From this perspective they are not immoral, but rather enterprising characters who do what it takes to get the job done. As Nazaré explained, "*Exus* are the ones who go to battle for us, doing the dirty work that needs to be done." "When you need something done quickly, no questions asked," another devotee advised me, "you go to an *exu*." Viewed in this way, *exus* may be understood as resourceful problem solvers whose actions are not constrained by more dominant conceptions of right and wrong.

Conceição, the manager of a small store catering to practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions, elaborated on the relativity of good and evil in connection to Exu: "Because Exu is commanded by human desire, by the will of the person," she told me, "he can do good or evil. For him it's the same. Good or evil in quotes, okay, because this also depends on the eye of the beholder. If good didn't exist, then bad wouldn't exist. So it's a way of understanding, a way of seeing. One side does not exist without the other. A balance has two scales and you have to put a little on each side: in order to weigh one side you have to weigh the other." Many devotees with whom I spoke articulated similar sentiments, contrasting *exus* with the *orixás*, Catholic saints, or other kinds of supernatural entities pertaining to the familiar sphere of the *casa*. As Fábio, a *zelador* I met through Nazaré, put it, "Exu is an instrument to realize the desire of a person." The moral character of an *exu* spirit's actions therefore is determined by the nature of the petitioner's request.

Emphasizing their capacity for hard work, devotees frequently referred to these intrepid spirits as the "slaves" of the *orixás*, responsible for performing the "heavy" tasks that these representatives of African ancestral wisdom and traditional morality will not undertake.⁴⁰ *Exus* "are the ones who go to the street to work," Fábio explained, "the ones who actually carry out the difficult services for the *orixás*." Others, more influenced by Spiritist precepts, maintained that *exu* spirits make amends for the villainy of their former lives by fulfilling their petitioners' requests, eventually evolving to a higher level in the spiritual hierarchy. Overhearing my conversation with Conceição, a customer articulated this

conception succinctly: “*Exus* are wandering in the shadows looking for light,” she told me. “Because [of their past circumstances] they are wandering in the shadows. And when they work it is the light that they are seeking. By helping people they gain more light. The more they work, the more they help people, the more light they gain until they finally leave the shadows.”

Some devotees say that because of their own difficult lives while on earth, *exu* spirits are especially sensitive to the dilemmas humans face. Others describe *exus* as the inhabitants of the Afro-Brazilian spirit world who, in position, circumstance, or character, are most like themselves. The following account collected by a Brazilian researcher expressed this sentiment clearly: “*Exu[s]* are spirits of people who had nothing, like *Exu Pretinho* [Little Black *Exu*], who manifests in me. He was a black boy who was abandoned by his mother, he was raised like that, cared for one day by one person, the next by another. Just like me, my life was like that.”⁴¹ A significant part of the appeal of *exu* spirits lies in the fact that, as the anthropologist Paula Montero observed, they collectively present “a ‘condensed description’ of the life conditions of the most disadvantaged populations of society,” reflecting back to devotees a version of their own lives transformed into a source of spiritual assistance and power.⁴² Among these populations *Pomba Gira* can be read not only as a “fallen woman,” but also as a powerful female figure beholden to no one man.

Unfettered by the values and behavioral codes of polite society, *Pomba Gira* and other *exu* spirits are bawdy and fun-loving, qualities that make them especially beloved. Ceremonies in which they are invoked are theatrical spectacles much prized for their spiritual as well as entertainment value. With their diabolic *gargalhadas* and exaggerated manner, these spirits titillate their audience with erotic provocations and bawdy but pointed commentary. Even as the nefarious and decadent aspects of these street spirits are emphasized—indeed enthusiastically celebrated in songs, stories, and imagery—the majority of their admirers experience *exus* not as evil beings, but as powerful yet approachable allies whom they call upon to redirect the flow of scarce social goods: returning a wayward lover from the arms of another, extracting a job from a recalcitrant boss, recuperating objects or benefits that have been lost through the malice of others.

Those who work regularly with these spirits treat them with a great deal of affection and intimacy, often describing them as *compadres* and *comadres*, godparents or protective patrons.⁴³ The use of these and

other terms of fictive kinship indicates that, despite the fact that *exus* are imaged as treacherous spirits of the street, devotees experience and relate to them in ways that complicate any neat dichotomy of *casa* and *rua*, good and evil, moral and immoral.⁴⁴ Such dichotomies instead reflect a second-order attempt to organize spiritual practices around an ethical framework grounded in normative Christian principles.⁴⁵ While this dualistic ethical framework does not adequately capture the complex realities of devotees' interchanges with *exus* or other kinds of spirit entities, it is, at least at the level of popular discourse, hegemonic. And so devotees often are forced to moralize these spirits by claiming, for example, that the *exus* work only with the permission of the *orixás*, their patrons and moral superiors.

Among themselves Nazaré and the members of her community, like most who cultivate long-term relationships with *exu* and *pomba gira* spirits, wasted little time with abstract theologizing about good and evil and showed no interest in apportioning the universe into such exclusive ontological domains. Their concern was focused on the everyday malice wrought by human beings: the jealousy of a coworker, a lover's betrayal, competition between neighbors or friends. For them evil existed only in specific acts wrought by specific people known or unknown. It did not exist in the abstract and could not be disentangled from the complex and often inscrutable motivations that guide human behavior. Protection, that is, self-defense against the malicious acts of others, was the salient issue. Seldom did Nazaré or anyone else with whom I spoke describe their relationship with an *exu* spirit in terms of its impact on other people, but rather as that person's own defender and protector. The common sentiment shared by all was, as one devotee put it, "*Exus* fight on our behalf, protecting us from malice and enmity."

POMBA GIRA'S PREDILECTIONS

Protection in matters of the heart and loins is the special purview of Pomba Gira; attracting and keeping a lover, punishing betrayals, arranging clandestine paramours and other intrigues are all part of this entity's characteristic repertoire. Though both men and women call upon her services, Pomba Gira is especially popular among women. She is, as one admirer told the French writer Serge Bramly, "the ally of women. She knows the secrets of femininity, childhood, pregnancy, and love."⁴⁶ In exchange for her mystical interventions into the lives of her petitioners, Pomba Gira demands feminine vanity items and other luxuries. One female devotee

explained to me, “If you are having a romantic problem, a problem with a man, you call on her and you try to gratify her as you would a woman: you give her perfume, gold jewelry—she likes gold jewelry, drink. Everything that she likes you give to her. You try to gratify her as you would a woman.”

Pomba Gira’s predilections are well-known, and the small shops that service Afro-Brazilian ritual practitioners typically stock the flamboyant costume jewelry sets, ornamented cigarette holders, bejeweled chalices, and other feminine fancies beloved by this entity. These luxury items help establish Pomba Gira’s glamour, that elusive concoction of style and beauty that suggests wealth, the promise of pleasures to be had and desires to be sated. Although some *pomba giras* are described as low-class *vagabundas* with foul mouths, more often than not glamour is central to how devotees imagine, describe, and ritually incarnate these entities. But glamour, like taste, is an elusive aesthetic criterion shaped by class. Among those who can ill afford such opulence in their own lives, Pomba Gira’s showy baubles and taste for champagne communicate a sophistication that, by bourgeois standards, reads as merely vulgar.

Regardless of the humble circumstances of Pomba Gira’s devotees or narrative descriptions of Maria Molambo’s desperate poverty, as incarnated in ritual ceremonies *pomba gira* spirits typically appear in golden *bijouterie* and gowns of luxurious-looking fabric; satins, lace, and gold-embroidered damask in the colors of red or black are especially favored. “She only has the name Molambo,” Nazaré acknowledged. “But she doesn’t like anything raggedy. She likes rich clothing.” These women of the street, unlike those of Avenida Atlântica or Rio’s other red-light districts, are attired in gowns with close-fitting bodices and long, ample skirts whose style is reminiscent less of an actual prostitute than of a nineteenth-century noblewomen. As the journalist Alma Guillermprieto remarked in a profile of Rio, with their layered petticoats and long overskirts *pomba giras* are attired in far more clothes than most women in Rio ever put on—and certainly more than any contemporary women of the night.⁴⁷

These elaborate gowns are custom-made for the use of the spirit, and lengths of fabric for this purpose are a common gift proffered by devotees, admirers, and clients. Nazaré had several of these gowns in different fabrics created for her Molambo by a local seamstress according to the spirit’s specifications. When not in use, Molambo’s gowns and jewelry were carefully cleaned and kept in a special room. No one else was

permitted to wear the dresses, neither Nazaré herself nor any of the other spirits that she incarnated, particularly Maria Padilha, with whom Molambo is said to have an ongoing rivalry.

Maria Molambo's most spectacular attire was reserved for special occasions, like her annual *feira* or birthday party, an especially lavish ceremony in the spirit's honor that Nazaré held every November. Ceremonies like these constitute an important part of Nazaré's ritual obligations to the spirits and are open to the public. Elaborate events of great revelry, they can attract dozens of spectators and petitioners who come to pay tribute to Molambo and other *exu* spirits who take full advantage of the opportunity to return to the human world. On these occasions the spirits are invited not to work for supplicants but to enjoy themselves and the gratitude of all whom they have helped throughout the year. My own introduction to Pomba Gira occurred at one of these *feiras*. The statues at the Madureira market had piqued my curiosity, but until that evening I had not myself experienced the allure so often referenced by Pomba Gira's admirers, a peculiar mix of sensuality and melodrama tinged with a hint of scandal. Like so many others, I found myself captivated.

MARIA MOLAMBO OF THE SEVEN CATACOMBS

They arrive at midnight, . . . the Pombagiras dressed in their scandalous outfits of red and black, with their long black hair adorned with a red rose, and the bearing of a prostitute, whether of the most miserable brothel or elegant salon of vice, gambling and perdition; on occasion a great lady, sophisticated and refined, but always a woman of the night.⁴⁸

The evening in question began inauspiciously, with a long ride on a crowded metro train filled with weary second-shifters returning from their daily labors in the *centro*. Disembarking at the penultimate stop, I followed my contact, a recent acquaintance, over a low bridge and along a thoroughfare lined by crudely constructed buildings and make-shift bars. A friend of a friend of a neighbor had invited her to a ceremony in Acari, a peripheral neighborhood on Rio's poor and working-class north side, and she in turn had invited me.

Passing a gas station, we turned onto a narrow side street whose asphalt paving had buckled in on itself in places, forming large sinkholes. Cinder-block walls separated houses in various stages of construction from the street and from each other, the houses getting progressively more makeshift and densely packed as the road snaked up into the heart of one of Rio's infamous shantytowns, or *favelas*.⁴⁹ Picking our way

between the sinkholes, we stopped at an otherwise nondescript doorway decorated with urns. The door was open. Offerings of eggs and small white balls of a dough-like substance had been placed in the corners of the threshold, ritual foods of the spirits guarding the entrance to this *terreiro*, or Afro-Brazilian ritual center. Passing through, I glimpsed iron implements encrusted with feathers and the dark, viscous residue of blood offerings.

Being unfamiliar with the ritual schedule of this particular community, we arrived after the evening's ceremony had begun, and the incessant throbbing of the drums beckoned us down a long, narrow passageway. At the end was a low set of stairs that opened on to the *barracão*, the *terreiro*'s public ritual space.⁵⁰ A rectangular room the size of an average American living room, it was bisected by a low wall into a small section for spectators and a larger open space around which the dancing *filhos-de-santo* circled. The women in the circle of dancers were dressed in loose blouses and long, full skirts made more voluminous by stiff underskirts, the men in light-colored pants and T-shirts. As they danced the *filhos-de-santo* vigorously sang a *ponto cantado* celebrating the arrival of Pomba Gira from her otherworldly abode:

Good evening, good evening,
 we bid you good evening.
 Maria Molambo we bid you good evening.
 Pomba Gira has arrived to work,
 ask what you will.
 But beware, my friend,
 she is beautiful,
 but she's a woman of the street.

The entrance of an obviously foreign stranger caused a ripple of curiosity to undulate among those assembled, working its way to the room's center, where the *terreiro*'s leader swayed in the grip of her spirit. To my discomfort, an assistant beckoned me into the circle of dancers and introduced me to this spirit, Maria Molambo das Sete Catacombas, or Raggedy Maria of the Seven Catacombs. She alone seemed to take the sudden appearance of a foreigner as nothing out of the ordinary, being accustomed to honorary visits and other acknowledgments of her distinction.

Resplendent in a black bustier with gold braid and an elegant, floor-length overskirt of black lace stiffened by layers of petticoats, Maria Molambo hugged me in greeting and asked if I found her beautiful, a



FIGURE 13. Nazaré as Maria Molambo.

question that I could only affirm (figure 13). If long, vermilion nails and gold-plated trinkets were the relevant indexes, she was certainly a model of feminine splendor. In response she offered me a sip of her wine and resumed her dance, puffing on her ubiquitous cigarette between sips. Later I learned that Molambo regularly polishes off several bottles of Martini and Rossi red vermouth, her favorite brand, although she also favors champagne. As she danced Molambo flirted with the audience, who laughed at her lewd comments and suggestive movements as they joined in the singing with unrestrained gusto.

Having performed the requisite greetings, I retreated to the perimeter and settled myself into the chair that had been provided. For the next several hours the small room was filled with rhythm, dance, song, and a boisterous back-and-forth between the guest of honor and her admirers. After Maria Molambo had enjoyed the undivided attention of those in attendance and received the gifts proffered, others began to receive their own *exu* spirits. The *terreiro's* assistants were kept busy supplying these recent arrivals with drinks and smokes and helping them dress in the appropriate ritual costume. Typically, individual Afro-Brazilian spirits

are distinguished by an article of clothing or an accessory, like a cape or a hat, particular to that entity and worn on ritual occasions. Once properly costumed, those incorporated joined in the song and dance. In between bragging of their beauty and seductive prowess, these *pomba gira* and other *exu* spirits engaged in a profanity-laced banter with spectators, trading provocative jibes. Occasionally a member of the audience approached one of the embodied spirits to confide his or her particular troubles, prompting a whispered consultation. The night slowly ebbed away in this manner, swelling and falling with the combined energy of the celebrants, a scrim of cigarette smoke thickening midair.

As the first rays of dawn began to pierce the haze, the drummers began the rhythms that would send the spirits back to their world. The *filhos-de-santo*, who had been filling the room with dance and song for many hours, were exhausted and their ardor was waning. Noting this, Maria Molambo admonished the crowd brusquely. People began to clap with more energy, and a circle formed around her. Satisfied, she swirled around and around, finally allowing the drummer to *puxar* (“pull” or call out) the farewell songs that would accompany her back to the spirit world.

And so it was that Maria Molambo left the human body that she had inhabited for much of that night and Maria Nazaré da Souza Oliveira returned. As the spirit left her body, Nazaré convulsed and swayed, two assistants ensuring that she did not fall from the force of its departure. Trembling and with unsteady legs, she was led to a chair and handed a glass of water. As she began to recover, my presence was explained to her and I was introduced again, for Nazaré claims to have no knowledge of what transpires when she is possessed by one of her spirits.⁵¹ Regarding me intently, she asked what had brought me. A long, uncomfortable pause followed my mumbled reply about wanting to learn more about the spirits. Finally she motioned to a young man, whom I later learned was her son, and said something to him in a low voice. Taking out a small piece of paper, he wrote a telephone number on it and handed it to me. I was to call the number the following week to arrange an appointment with Nazaré.

The awkwardness of our first encounter persisted throughout my early visits to Nazaré. Neither of us was sure what exactly I was after, and though she was unfailingly hospitable, it was clear that she didn’t quite know what to make of me. Unlike a client, I wasn’t asking for her help or ritual services, and though I had explained my interest in Pomba Gira to the best of my ability I wasn’t presenting any of the usual problems for which people seek this spirit. Still I kept visiting. Often I would

arrive at the time she had specified only to wait several hours as she talked on the telephone or attended other clients. Sometimes she was not even at home, and I would wait in her son's living room watching television and feeling ill at ease. At first I took this as an indication that I was not particularly welcome, but after a time I realized that this treatment was not unusual, nor was it directed solely at me. Nazaré went about her business and expected others to adjust to her schedule accordingly.

Eventually she began to include me in her errands and to expect my participation in her bimonthly *toques*, ceremonies in which the spirits are summoned with drum and song. Even as I began to feel more comfortable around Nazaré herself, however, I remained painfully self-conscious around her Pomba Gira, for I regularly was the butt of that entity's bawdy humor or erotic pranks. Because my formal study of Portuguese had not acquainted me with the earthier aspects of the language, I usually had to have the joke explained to me, heightening the amusement of onlookers and my own embarrassment. To this day Nazaré's various *pomba gira* spirits can still disconcert me. And this makes sense, for Pomba Gira is a trickster figure known for ignoring limits and exceeding boundaries, whether of social comportment or moral action.

HOLY HARLOTS: THE AMBIVALENT POWER OF POMBA GIRA

Mischievous and sometimes punitive, Pomba Gira is an intensely ambivalent figure. Devotees say that she is unpredictable, never completely *confiável* (trustworthy) or *desinteressada* (impartial).⁵² As in her relations with human beings, the ambivalent potency of Pomba Gira is a theme that runs throughout the mythology dedicated to this spirit entity. In stories, images, and songs she embodies the seductive yet dangerous power of the "wicked woman," whether prostitute or *feiticeira*. These depictions condense the collective fantasies and anxieties that surround female sexuality when undomesticated by traditional ideals of feminine propriety.

But Pomba Gira's mythological corpus also features meaningful stories of betrayal, suffering, and *machismo*, stories in which the main protagonists are single women confronting the vagaries of life in a profoundly male-dominated society with their wits and the resources that they have at hand. Although set within a conventional narrative frame that condemns female independence as wicked, the schematic and malleable story line of these tales permits devotees to emphasize those things that resonate with their own experiences or a specific problem at hand. And because

there is no official codification process, people are free to embellish or create new tales building on stock themes.

Mythological narratives like the tales of Maria Molambo and Maria Padilha, as well as Afro-Brazilian iconography, provide a basic template for Pomba Gira as a wicked woman or seductive femme fatale. Yet as I discovered that fateful evening, ritual manifestations of these entities convey a rather different understanding of Pomba Gira's erotic potency. Condemned in myth as dissolute and even deadly, Pomba Gira is exalted in ritual as a potent entity who can be compelled to intervene in the world, breaking through the obstacles that impede her petitioners' ability to realize their desires. Even as *pontos cantados* and other narratives about Pomba Gira reflect normative understandings of female sexuality as dangerously immoral and even deadly when not subject to patriarchal control, ritual embodiments of the spirit celebrate this transgressive sexuality as a source of mystical power and knowledge that endows her with special insight into human affairs. As Reginaldo Prandi observed, for her petitioners, Pomba Gira's own experiences while on earth, whether as a streetwalking prostitute or a high-born courtesan, have given her first-hand knowledge of one of the most vital yet fraught arenas of human life: sexuality, erotic passion, and the relationship between men and women.⁵³

The figure of Pomba Gira thus operates on two levels, with two consciences: one is superficially explicit, discursive, and consonant with a more dominant ideology, and one is implicit, practical, and divergent from the dominant ideology. That is to say, though referential to dominant norms of femininity and sexuality, Pomba Gira simultaneously makes available alternative readings more compatible with the everyday experiences of her devotees. Hence Pomba Gira can be at one and the same time the incarnation of a Christian she-devil, the antithesis of order, morality, and propriety, and the spirit of a savvy prostitute whose expertise in the ways of the world can be brought to bear on human dilemmas—for good or for ill. Although these dimensions of Pomba Gira's persona may appear to be mutually exclusive or contradictory, they are in fact central to her ambivalent power to work in the lives of her devotees, catalyzing transformations of various kinds by disclosing other interpretative possibilities and strategies for being in the world.

Understanding the nature of the work that Pomba Gira performs requires that we understand the texture of life for her devotees, the majority of whom, like Nazaré, inhabit Rio's *favelas* and working-class districts. More particularly it requires familiarity with the social and moral terrain specific to these areas, terrain determined not only by Rio's unique geog-

raphy but by historical and sociological factors that have had profound consequences for the inhabitants of these neighborhoods. In the next two chapters I endeavor to sketch a picture of life on the urban periphery, paying attention to prevailing social and moral dynamics that structure devotees' appeals to Pomba Gira. In certain ways my regular visits to Acari, the neighborhood where Nazaré was born and where she currently resides, gave me more insight into the phenomenon of Pomba Gira in Rio de Janeiro than the dozens of conversations about this entity that I had with devotees.

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PART TWO

Society

The Urban Periphery

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Life on the Margins

Religious practices and understandings have meaning only in relation to other cultural forms and in relation to the life experiences and actual circumstances of the people using them; what people mean and intend by particular religious idioms can be understood only situationally, on a broad social and biographical field, not within the terms of a religious tradition or religious language understood as existing apart from history.

—Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*

Landscapes have a moral dimension, they speak to notions of how the world *should* be, or more accurately how it should *appear* to be.

—Denis Cosgrove, “Power and Place in the Venetian Territories”

In the course of the last century, the *favela* served as one of the preferred specters of the urban imagination: as the vector of illnesses, generator of deadly epidemics; as the locus par excellence of *malandros* and vagrants, blacks who were enemies of honest, hard work; as a promiscuous mass of populations lacking morals.

—Alba Zaluar and Marcos Alvito, “Introdução,” in *Um século de favela*

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

For good reason Rio de Janeiro is known affectionately throughout Brazil as the *cidade maravilhosa*, or marvelous city, a place whose exuberant blend of azure blue skies, white sand beaches, tropical vegetation, and graceful high-rises makes it one of the most stunning urban centers in

the world. Beyond its breathtaking beauty, however, Rio de Janeiro's most striking feature, commented upon by visitors and inhabitants alike, is the everyday proximity of tremendous affluence and miserable poverty.¹ The material extremes that distinguish one of the world's most inequitable distributions of wealth are evident in ramshackle *favelas* that overlook the city's most expensive real estate and in dense slums that line its major roadways. Unlike other cities whose poor inhabit segregated enclaves hidden from the view of outsiders, Rio's underprivileged areas are impossible to ignore, for they are built into the very topography of the city.

As a result of its location, wedged between the Atlantic coastline and a ridge of mountainous granite peaks, Rio's most affluent beachside neighborhoods are encircled by rocky outcrops on whose precipitous slopes the impoverished and intrepid have built a parallel metropolis. And although the residents of this metropolis are intimately familiar with the lives of the more prosperous, whose homes they clean and whose various personal needs they service, seldom is the reverse true. The social distance between rich and poor in Rio de Janeiro is reinforced in many ways, among them a comforting ignorance on the part of the former about the lives of the latter. This lack of familiarity is filled by stereotypes and prejudices that, absent the counterweight of direct experience, intensify in times of social crisis.

With its chic shopping districts encircled by vertiginously perched *favelas* and its arresting juxtaposition of opulence and squalor, Rio is a city of contrasts both physical and social. Its distinctive topography invites use as a metaphor for other kinds of relationships whose dynamic interactions shape social life within its environs. In this chapter and the next I chart some of the coordinates of what may be termed a "moral topography": a local terrain of social relations, practices, ideas, and discourses that classify people and spaces according to widely shared (although not uncontested) ideas about propriety, decency, and legitimacy. As the metaphor of a landscape suggests, this topography is not uniform: different groups inhabit different locations within it, have different bases of experience from which to evaluate themselves and others, and possess different levels of access to the means through which to disseminate their perspectives to a larger public. But regardless of inhabitants' particular location within this landscape, they share certain conceptions about how to navigate its terrain that are expressed in the language of morality. The work of mapping out this moral topography helps illuminate larger social dynamics central to the logic of *Pomba Gira*, a task that is taken up more fully in parts III and IV.

As one of the most visible manifestations of discrepancies in the distribution of economic and other forms of capital, the *favela* occupies a key place in the city's moral topography and serves as a symbolically resonant focal point for tensions surrounding these inequalities. In this chapter I discuss the historical emergence of the *favela* and its significance in the public imaginary shared by *cariocas*, as the inhabitants of Brazil's second largest metropolis are called. By the phrase "public imaginary" I mean to designate a constellation of widely shared ideas, thoughts, and images—in this case, about public space and its moral dimensions—that are assumed to be natural or obvious. These ideas are circulated in various forms, from media accounts to widely shared notions of common sense. Despite their putatively universal status, however, they express the experiences and understanding of Rio's more favored classes and largely reflect their privileged social position. One effect of this privilege is that those who lack the means to disseminate their perspective of the world as normative must make sense of their own, often incongruous experiences within the terms of its framework.

Since its origins at the end of the nineteenth century, the *favela* has preoccupied many of Rio's elites, who have portrayed it consistently as a space of moral and social depravity, home to criminals, beggars, vagrants, loose women, and other "indecent" types. The implantation of organized networks of drug dealers in these areas since the 1980s and the escalating brutality of their illicit trade, as well as the state's ineffectual efforts to combat it, have intensified the perception of the *favela* as a dangerous place inhabited by a criminally inclined underclass. In the prevailing rhetoric of the public imaginary, the *favela* is the domain of *os marginais* (the marginal), a socially disenfranchised population that threatens the normative social and moral order.

This image of the *favela* is largely accepted as self-evident, even by those who live within its environs, and thus forms part of *cariocas'* shared consciousness about their city. Perhaps more perniciously, it is reproduced within the *favela*, refracting into other moral distinctions as residents attempt to deflect the stigma that taints them. Where outsiders manage their fears of the *favela* and its inhabitants by, among other things, rigorously avoiding these areas, those who live there must resort to other strategies. I examine some of these strategies in the next chapter, paying particular attention to how they differ by gender. The present chapter and the next thus lay the foundation for an argument that I develop in the remainder of the book: in the context of a social-moral setting that is coded as illicit, stories and rituals dedicated to Pomba Gira

posit an alternative moral topography that draws on familiar elements of social space but offers different possibilities for action and interpretation.

I first began to think about the various ways that geographical and socioeconomic factors are ascribed moral significance in the course of my regular visits to Nazaré's house in Acari, a journey that I describe in the next section. In addition to acquainting the reader with the physical and social environment where Nazaré lives and works, this section introduces some of the social dynamics that I address later in this and the following chapters.

TRAVELING BETWEEN WORLDS

The penultimate stop on the metropolitan train line that connects downtown Rio with the neighborhoods of the Zona Norte, Acari is quite literally the end of the line. It is one among a number of poor and working-class communities clustered along the northern periphery of the city as it extends away from the sea and toward the marshy lowlands called the Baixada Fluminense. Traveling on the northbound metro from the city center to Acari, one can watch the landscape gradually flatten out as the granite hills that cluster near the coastline recede into the distance, replaced by long, grimy stretches with little topographical variation. Even the air changes, the humid, seaside tang giving way to a noticeably hotter, drier, and dustier haze. Bereft of marine breezes, its formerly forested hills now partially denuded, Acari in the dead of summer can feel ten degrees hotter than the centrally located neighborhood, just steps from the Guanabara Bay, where I resided during the years of my ethnographic research.

The hour or more train ride that separated my apartment in central Rio from Acari marked the distance between not only two different sides of the city, but two socioeconomic realities. Their incommensurability, more than anything else, seemed to account for the reaction of some people I met who simply couldn't imagine why I would choose to spend so much time in a place bereft of Rio's celebrated charms: beaches, abundant vistas, and beautiful people. Indeed exiting the metro on my way to Nazaré's house-cum-temple, I frequently was struck by the discrepancy between the chic neighborhoods of the wealthy Zona Sul (South Zone), with their manicured vegetation and graceful apartment buildings, and the dusty, twisting alleyways of Acari (figure 14).

My route led me by the river for which the area was named, now choked by half-submerged refuse and slicks of viscous oil. On one



FIGURE 14. Acari.

memorable occasion I saw a very large boar snuffling among the detritus along the riverbank—not a plump, farm-lot-pink kind of pig but a huge creature with a black, hairy hide and small tusks protruding from a toothed snout. Some residents of the city’s outlying districts keep horses to haul cargo; large boars are rather more unusual. Most likely it was destined for someone’s *churrasco*, or barbecue, a tradition for which, alongside soccer, Brazilians are internationally renowned. Like neighborhood soccer matches, *churrasco* can be found throughout the city, from impromptu street stands to the cavernous restaurants called *churrascarias*, where waiters, bearing aloft large skewers, cheerfully load your plate with an endless succession of grilled meats. *Churrasco* is also a key component in ceremonies dedicated to the *exu* spirits, who are particularly fond of *carne assada* (roast meat). Their preferred offerings are animals with black hides: pigs, goats, and the distinctive guinea fowl, or *galinha de angola*, an elegant bird whose jet-black plumage is dappled with tiny white spots.

There is still something of a rural element in Acari, although many people, like Nazaré, have resided there for at least one generation. Some of the most recent arrivals to the area are migrants from the Northeast,

who have traded the poverty and desolation of the sun-scorched *sertão*, the scrublands of the northeastern interior, for urban squalor. Accustomed to subsistence agriculture, many nordestinos keep chickens and other small livestock or tend vegetable gardens, activities utterly foreign to more established residents like Nazaré, who are the proletariat of the city's wage-labor economy.

Because Acari is strategically located at the intersection of two main roadways linking the city of Rio de Janeiro with its outlying municipalities and with the megalopolis of São Paulo to the southwest, it has been the site of various waves of migrant settlement. The construction of one of those roadways in the 1940s, Avenida Brasil, first facilitated access to the area; it was settled by workers migrating to the city's expanding industrial zone from the nearby states of Espírito Santo and Minas Gerais.² Among these first settlers were Nazaré's grandparents, who arrived from Minas in the late 1940s. At first the precarious habitations that migrants built were destroyed by the police, only to be rebuilt again and again by their determined owners. Eventually habitation increased to the point that the state could not keep up and Acari rapidly grew.

It is still growing today. From the top floor of Nazaré's residence I can see the beginnings of a *favela* budding on a wooded hillside about a quarter of a mile away. In time—two years from now? five years?—the trees will have been cut down to make way for more scrap-metal shacks, and the rough domiciles of these first settlers will have been upgraded to sturdier constructions of brick and mortar. Perhaps the narrow walking paths that now zigzag through the trees will be paved over and the houses clandestinely electrified with the pilfered voltage of nearby streetlamps. Such is the growth cycle of the *favela*, like some voracious beast devouring the natural landscape and leaving in its place crudely built hovels and serpentine alleys characteristic of a mode of urban construction that is at once unregulated and organic.³

Of course it is people—the working poor, migrants, the destitute, and that category of abjection that Brazilians call *os miseráveis*, the truly miserable—who animate this beast, people seeking nothing more than shelter and who, bereft of other means, seize available plots of unoccupied land. Over the past one hundred years *favelas* have grown apace with the city, absorbing ex-slaves, waves of migrants, and displaced workers forced out of the city center by urban development and high rents. Municipal officials estimate that anywhere from one-fifth to one-third of Rio's current population of six million calls one of its more than 750 *favelas* home.⁴

Although nonresidents tend to see the city's *favelas* and peripheral neighborhoods as an undifferentiated mass of poor people, home to *os marginais*, Acari, like most of these areas, contains significant class differences. The area comprises a number of government-constructed, low-income housing projects and smaller *favelas* as well as more established residential neighborhoods with paved roads and regular lots, known locally as *o asfalto* (asphalted areas). Inhabitants range from the truly miserable, who live in precarious conditions without running water or sewers, to the working classes, who enjoy many of the amenities typically associated with the more affluent middle classes: satellite televisions, major appliances, cars, and so forth.

Residents at the latter end of the spectrum, like Nazaré herself, would not describe their environs as a *favela*, although they might describe the newer and more rudimentary settlements of the neighborhood as such.⁵ Acari's inhabitants, like those of any other residential area, are accustomed to making the fine distinctions that differentiate various levels within the local social hierarchy, and a major criterion is the quality and location of one's domicile. These differences in habitation are extremely significant, and residents will frequently compare themselves to others based on the construction of their house or its proximity to less than desirable locations like waste-dumping areas or concentrations of more precarious habitations. Those who live in asphalted areas do not consider themselves *favela* residents, although the neighborhood may have begun that way or be so classified by the city or outsiders.

The more established areas of Acari boast carefully tended homes with carports and tiled entranceways, satellite dishes visible from the street. On my walk from the train station I followed a winding street that meandered by pastel-colored houses with enclosed yards and tidy walkways, inhabited by bus drivers and store clerks, nurse's aides and primary school teachers. In front of their dwellings various entrepreneurs had established small-scale businesses, or *birosacas*, offering candy, soft drinks, household goods, and cold beer to passersby. There was one such establishment located just down the street from Nazaré's temple. It seemed always to be occupied by a small number of men accompanied by their shared, liter bottle of Antarctica beer, who paused in their conversations to watch as I walked slowly past, breathless from the heat and the incline of the street.

A porcelain urn and several terra cotta containers arrayed in a niche above a single and otherwise unremarkable doorway marked the entrance to Nazaré's *terreiro* (temple). *Ferramentas*,⁶ iron implements representing

various *orixás*, guarded the doorway, warding away any negativity or evil energy that might seek entrance there. During ceremonial events, offerings of eggs and small white balls of *farinha de mandioca* (tapioca flour) paste, ritual foods of the spirits, were placed there. For most of the time that I lived in Rio Nazaré and her husband and youngest children occupied an apartment at the front of the building; the *barracão*, the central site of most public ritual activities, was in the rear, down a short flight of steps. Strictly speaking, a *barracão* is a large, open area where public rituals are held. Ideally such a structure is open on three sides; however, because space is a luxury in this cramped, urban setting, Nazaré's *barracão* was completely closed in, sealed from the prying eyes of neighbors. Colloquially the word *barracão* is used to refer to the entirety of the temple complex, which typically includes several rooms dedicated to the ritual requirements of different spirit entities.

Because food offerings and herbal preparations are essential for the functioning of any temple, one of these rooms is always a kind of kitchen. Adjacent to Nazaré's *barracão*, a small kitchen opened onto the inner sanctum, called the *roncô*, where initiates were secluded and the altars to their ruling *orixás* were kept. Off the main hallway that led into the *barracão* from the street was a *casa do exu*, a small room in which the altars dedicated to the community's *exu* spirits were kept. These altars must be kept separate from those of the other *orixás*, an indication of the different temperaments and characteristics among the various entities of the Afro-Brazilian spiritual universe. This delineation of boundaries, spatial and otherwise, for the maintenance of spiritual powers structures many kinds of ritual activities (figure 15).⁷

Immediately adjacent to the room housing the *assentamentos* (altars) representing the *exu* spirits was a bathroom, and opposite it lay the small room where Nazaré consulted the spirits on behalf of paying clients, using the technique called *jogo de búzios*, the throw (or play) of the shells. The *jogo de búzios* practiced throughout Brazil is a simplified form of the West African Ifá divination system involving sixteen cowrie shells. Although the figure of the *babalaô*, the master of Ifá and specialist in divining the will of the *orixás*, has nearly died out in Brazil, the title and much of its accompanying knowledge has been preserved in other New World locales, such as Cuba.⁸

Typical of virtually all constructions in the *favela*, the building that housed Nazaré's *barracão* was in a perpetual state of becoming, and periodic additions altered its configuration. Like the majority of *favela* residents, Nazaré and her family invest in construction projects as their



FIGURE 15. *Assentamentos*.

budget allows, adding an additional floor that will serve as an apartment for a family member or making other improvements. In fact most habitations appear to be in a continuous state of construction, an effect that only adds to the haphazard look of the neighborhood to unaccustomed eyes. Over the course of my time in Brazil Nazaré's building underwent many changes as walls were knocked down or built up, doorways opened up or sealed off, tile added here, plaster and paint there. Most astonishing to me were the two entire floors that sprouted, creating separate apartments for the eldest of Nazaré's adult children. The unofficial status of the *favela* in the eyes of city officials means that there are no zoning laws or need for permits, so as their families expand, inhabitants build upward and outward. The perpetually unfinished state of these structures gives the *favela* its characteristic appearance.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE *FAVELA*

Like Acari, most *favelas* began as *invasões* (invasions), clusters of crude housing constructed of reclaimed materials by people without official title to the land, principally former slaves and migrants to the city. Rio's

first *favela* is said to have been established in 1897 on a hillside near the city center by soldiers returning to the city, then the federal capital, from an ill-fated campaign to suppress the Canudos Rebellion, a millenarian movement led by a charismatic holy man that had attracted thousands of disenfranchised peasants in the country's arid Northeast.⁹ Since that first settlement the city's *favelas* have grown exponentially, especially during periods of urban renovation, economic downturns, and successive waves of migration in the 1940s and 1950s and again in the 1970s and 1980s as thousands sought better lives in the rapidly industrializing Southeast.¹⁰ Today large *favelas* are visible from most parts of Rio, making the city's economic extremes an everyday aspect of life for *cariocas*. Romantics and those of idealistic temperament like to say that this gives Rio de Janeiro a uniquely democratic character, as rich and poor alike share the same abundant beaches and stunning vistas.

However, beyond the proximity imposed by geography or daily encounters, rich and poor have little in common and inhabit different social worlds. My regular train ride to Nazaré's house and back was a passageway between these worlds, transporting me from a middle-class neighborhood whose amenities and attractions were comparable to those of its counterparts in the United States or Europe, to a peripheral area where a significant number of residents live in self-constructed domiciles without adequate plumbing or sewage disposal. Despite the fact that Acari is connected to the rest of the city by several forms of public transportation, parts of it lack basic infrastructure and municipal services like paved streets, garbage collection, and treated water and sanitation systems. Even in the more established sections of Acari, urban infrastructure can be substandard or ad hoc. In a neighborhood of nearly twenty-five thousand people there are few green spaces and only one public school.¹¹ Compared to areas of similar population density, local commerce is relatively sparse, forcing residents to travel outside of the neighborhood to purchase food, clothing, durable goods, and other household items.¹²

Such conditions are not unique to Acari, but are typical of poor neighborhoods and *favelas* throughout the city. The precarious state of these areas is reflected not only in insufficient urban infrastructure, haphazard streets, irregular constructions, and a lack of public schools and other community resources, but in other social indices. Compared to the city's wealthier districts, residents of these communities suffer higher rates of infant mortality, unemployment, and violence and have a life expectancy that is significantly lower. Among those who are employed, many

labor at the lowest end of the wage scale or in the informal economy, where they are not protected by federal labor laws or eligible for social security benefits. Because children living in poor neighborhoods often begin working at a young age in order to help support their households, they complete high school at a much lower rate. Lacking the requisite education and skills, children of poor families are restricted to the lowest wage levels of the economy, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and inequality.¹³

Because city officials regularly classified *favelas* as zones of illegal or unregulated settlement, many existed outside of the formal apparatus of municipal government until the 1990s, when the state inaugurated an ambitious plan to transform all of Rio's *favelas* into legitimate neighborhoods.¹⁴ Since then planned urbanization has brought municipal services such as sewers, garbage disposal, piped water, paved streets, schools, and health clinics to some of these areas, as well as giving *favela* residents legal title to the land where possible. But the process of official incorporation has been less successful in transforming the pervasive stereotype of the *favela* as a zone of illicit settlement outside of official control, the unruly underside of the modern metropolis.¹⁵

This taint of the illicit extends beyond the issue of usurped land or improvised constructions. From the very beginning of its history the *favela* connoted a state of urban poverty and chaos that in the public eye was associated with social and moral degeneracy or construed as a threat to public hygiene. Throughout the twentieth century newspaper articles, government programs, and political campaigns consistently represented the *favela* as a perversion of the city's social, moral, and economic order, characterized by crowded, unsanitary conditions that bred disease; harboring illegal activities such as the *jogo do bicho* (a numbers game); and populated by vagrants, drunks, criminals, prostitutes, and other social undesirables. Official attempts to address these social problems typically favored interventions that promised the moral, social, and hygienic "rehabilitation" of *favela* inhabitants, or their outright removal and relocation to housing projects on the urban periphery.¹⁶ Considered a blight on the urban landscape, the city's *favelas* were the targets of periodic eradication efforts by city authorities from the early 1900s to the 1970s.¹⁷

Even as officials and other elites depicted the *favela* as an enclave of lawlessness and the source of many of the city's problems, others looked to its vibrant street life as an important source of popular culture. A vanguard of poets and musicians found inspiration in samba, the polyrhythmic

fusion of African and European musical styles that first emerged among shantytown dwellers in the early twentieth century; their influence helped make it the national music of Brazil. Rio's world-famous carnival celebration owes its dynamism to the city's *favelas*, whose *escolas de samba* (samba schools) compete annually in an elaborate spectacle of street theater that includes thousands of sumptuously costumed dancers, drummers, and singers parading down the main avenue of the Sambódromo, the special parade stadium inaugurated by the government for this purpose in 1984. Where their parents grooved to the dulcet tones of bossa nova, a new generation of urban hipsters in Brazil, the United States, and Europe today favor the *baile funk* (funk music) from Rio's *favelas*. These two images of the *favela*—as the vibrant heart of the city's expressive culture and the home of its most marginal elements—exist in tandem, a seemingly inexhaustible resource of inspiration and fear.

This ambiguity also invests the *malandro*, the ne'er-do-well character closely associated with the *favela*. A recurring figure in the popular Brazilian imagination, the *malandro* is an archetypal antihero whose style, silver tongue, and ability to *levar vantagem* (take advantage) in any situation are celebrated in samba lyrics and popular novels. In his classic interpretation of Brazilian culture, *Carnavais, Malandros e Heróis* (Carnivals, Rogues and Heroes), the anthropologist Roberto DaMatta described the *malandro* as a “marginal hero” who is able to overcome his class disadvantage by using *esperteza* (cunning) and charm—bolstered by physical violence when necessary—to survive. Shorn of the romanticized imagery, the *malandro* is, at the same time, a mere *bandido* (bandit).

For Americans, the closest parallel to the *favela* is the ghetto or its slightly more euphemized cousin, “the inner city.” Yet where the American ghetto is associated with blacks and other racial minorities, Brazilian *favelas* are racially diverse.¹⁸ This is not to say that Brazil is free of racism, as has sometimes been claimed; when compared to their numbers in the general population, blacks account for a disproportionate percentage of *favela* inhabitants, and *favelas* in general are associated stereotypically with blacks. Nevertheless they have never been areas of institutionalized segregation based on skin color, as is the case for many ghettos in the United States.¹⁹

Like the ghetto, the *favela* is widely perceived as a dangerous urban environment inhabited by an impoverished underclass, an area whose various deprivations produce forms of criminality and immorality that threaten the larger society at the same time that an avant-garde faction of this larger society finds inspiration in its popular street culture. Once

safely appropriated and commodified, the distinctive styles of the ghetto and the *favela* then may be extolled as vital contributions to the nation's heritage or authentic sites of resistance to domination. The simultaneous threat and allure of these areas reinforce one another, and although both images are grounded in a version of reality, each is partial, presenting a picture whose contents are selected for their emotional valence, either positive or negative. Simultaneously maligned and romanticized, lauded and feared, the *favela*, like the ghetto, provides a constant Other against which the modern, civilized self is measured, as the authors of an edited volume commemorating a century of the *favela* concluded.²⁰

Although the 1980s saw some changes in official attitudes toward Rio's *favelas*, it also witnessed the establishment in many of these areas of a lucrative trade in cocaine and stolen firearms, reinforcing the popular image of the *favela* as a dangerously combustible mix of poverty, criminality, and drugs.²¹ Today the escalating cycle of violence associated with illicit drug trafficking and with police efforts to combat it has created a public security crisis that affects all *cariocas*, regardless of their socioeconomic status. Rates of homicide, gun violence, and injury from stray bullets have risen precipitously in Rio and its environs; between 1980 and 1994, for example, the murder rate in Rio tripled.²² In some areas of the city the intensity of firearm violence rivals that of states experiencing civil war or other armed conflicts.²³ And although the vast majority of victims of drug-related violence are young males between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four living in low-income neighborhoods, the effects of this violence have reverberated across the city.²⁴ Over the past decade drug gangs have commandeered and burned city buses, ordered schools, businesses, and banks to be temporarily closed, orchestrated prison riots, assassinated public officials, and attacked police stations and government buildings.²⁵ At various times the Brazilian army has been called in to contain the violence, especially around the annual week-long carnival celebrations or other events that bring large numbers of tourists to the city.²⁶ The periodic presence of federal forces has only confirmed the widespread perception among *cariocas* that local authorities have lost control of large swaths of the city and, as a result of endemic corruption and repressive policing, have actually exacerbated the problem.²⁷

CRIME AND VIOLENCE

Despite these problems, Rio's reputation as a friendly and laid-back place is still very much intact, and *cariocas* continue to enjoy this marvelous

city's delights, albeit with an enhanced concern for safety that has altered many aspects of life.²⁸ Security has become an omnipresent concern; closed residential enclaves with private security guards and twenty-four-hour surveillance and cars with tinted windows are in great demand by those who can afford them. It is not unusual for wealthy businessmen to hire their own private security force to protect them from kidnapping, a crime that has become increasingly prominent in urban centers like Rio and São Paulo.²⁹ People avoid wearing expensive jewelry or watches on the street because such items invite petty theft, and it has become customary for drivers to ignore stoplights after hours, afraid of being assaulted while waiting for the light to change. Most of my middle-class friends in Rio have been the victim of a robbery or larceny, often more than once. The majority of these were minor incidents that, although disturbing, did not represent a significant financial loss. More unsettling was a shared sense that crime in Rio is both capricious and uncontrollable, an impression continually fed by what the sociologist Teresa Caldeira referred to as "talk about crime."³⁰

Caldeira observed that because the interpretative effort to analyze and make sense of violent crime fosters an illusion of control over its perplexing randomness, people tend to talk about violence and crime far more than they actually experience them, a phenomenon that serves to exacerbate the atmosphere of fear.³¹ In media accounts and everyday conversations this talk about crime and the alarm it produces focus almost exclusively on the *favela*, which is perceived as both the principal locus of violence and its source. On a near daily basis newspaper headlines announce incidents of gun violence in Rio's *favelas* that have become routine, almost banal in their ordinariness:

ANOTHER DAY OF GUNFIRE IN THE FAVELA OF CHATUBA

O Globo, April 18, 2008

Three men were killed in an exchange of gunfire between police and drug traffickers in the favela of Chatuba. According to the police, they were *bandidos* [criminals]. It has been four days of conflict in the region, with fourteen deaths.³²

THE HIGH COST OF VIOLENCE: STUDENTS AFRAID TO GO TO SCHOOL AND BUSINESSES WITH CLOSED DOORS. THE CONFLICT IN THE FAVELAS DO ALEMÃO HAS ALREADY LASTED FIFTY DAYS

O Globo, June 20, 2007

The public schools in Inhaúma and Bonsucesso, next to the Favelas do Alemão, returned to functioning this Wednesday. . . . By morning and

afternoon, there was no gunfire [in the area] and so the three municipal schools that had closed on Tuesday reopened. But, according to the Secretary of Education, only 60% of students attended classes. The parents received a message from the teachers: “If there is gunfire we will close,” explained a mother.³³

Frequent reporting of this type, combined with a dearth of more positive images, fosters the impression that the city’s main problem is its *favelas*. As the media depicts these areas and their inhabitants in ever more totalizing terms as a *classe perigosa* (dangerous class), the fact that the main casualties of violent crime are *favela* inhabitants is increasingly obscured by the threat that they pose to middle- and upper-class residents of the Zona Sul:

VIOLENCE IN THE HILLS OF THE ZONA SUL: CONFRONTATIONS BETWEEN POLICE AND CRIMINALS IN THE HILLS OF THE ZONA SUL HAVE CHANGED THE DAILY ROUTINES OF RESIDENTS. ONE OF THE BIGGEST PROBLEMS IS IN COPACABANA, WHERE THERE ARE TWO FAVELAS: CHAPÉU MANGUEIRA E BABILÔNIA

O Globo, April 29, 2008

According to the police, last week a rival drug faction from Chapéu Mangueira invaded Babilônia, possibly with the help of criminals from Rocinha [another *favela*], who were already controlling the sites for drug sales. The traffickers from Chapéu Mangueira, who had help from colleagues from Pavão-Pavãozinho [a *favela* in the area], are trying to retake these sites.³⁴

Because much of the violence is linked to the drug trade, the word *favela* itself has become synonymous with drug trafficking, exacerbating the prejudice and fear directed at those who live in these areas.³⁵ *Favela* youth in particular, regardless of their actual participation in illegal activities, are commonly seen as *bandidos* who wreak havoc on society. What is not obvious from media accounts of endemic violence in the *favela* is the fact that the drug trade has created opportunities in these areas that the state has failed to provide.

RISE OF THE ORGANIZED DRUG TRADE

It was the very absence of a reliable state presence in these communities and their precarious infrastructure that helped create an environment conducive to large-scale drug trafficking. Although there appears to have been a small, relatively unorganized, and locally controlled trade in marijuana based in Rio’s *favelas* since at least the 1950s, the explosive growth

of an international market for cocaine in the late 1970s and early 1980s and the country's porous borders with major cocaine-producing neighbors Columbia, Peru, and Bolivia made the trafficking of that drug extremely lucrative.³⁶ High profits in turn occasioned the need for armed groups to defend the traffickers, and very quickly the drug trade in Rio became organized around militia-like gangs called *quadrilhas* operating out of *favelas* and peripheral neighborhoods.

With their labyrinthine alleyways and limited points of ingress and egress, *favelas* provided an ideal defensive terrain against the incursion of police and rival traffickers. The existence of large numbers of poor and unemployed residents lacking the skills or educational level to compete in Rio's increasingly technology-driven economy ensured the availability of a local workforce willing to exchange the financial uncertainty, monotony, long hours, and humiliation of low-paid labor for the easy cash generated by the trade in illicit drugs. By the 1990s the *tráfico* (drug trade) was thoroughly institutionalized within Rio's largest *favelas*, and today authorities estimate that over half of all *favela* communities in the city are dominated by *quadrilhas*. So extensive is the trade that Rio de Janeiro has become a major transit point for cocaine destined for markets in Europe and North America, in addition to supplying a sizable local market.³⁷

Despite the allure of easy money in communities where many struggle to support their families, drug trafficking involves only a tiny percentage of local residents; most estimates put the figure at 1 percent.³⁸ Of that 1 percent, the vast majority engaged in the *quadrilhas*' day-to-day operations are young men, primarily between the ages of thirteen and thirty. In addition boys as young as seven sometimes serve as lookouts, messengers, or *aviãozinhos*, "little airplanes," that is, drug carriers. Women and girls are involved far less directly in trafficking, although some may work as *endoladores*, packaging cocaine or marijuana in small quantities for sale on the streets.³⁹ More often women support the trade indirectly by preparing and selling *quentinhas*, or cooked meals, for traffickers working in packaging or distribution sectors. In these and other ways the *tráfico* benefits the local economy by stimulating an informal service sector that caters to traffickers and their clientele. Nevertheless the majority of the money generated by illegal drug trafficking does not stay in these communities or benefit their members in any long-term way.⁴⁰ As Robert Gay observed, while those at the upper reaches of the drug hierarchy may enrich themselves for a time, most of those involved in the

trade live in the same conditions as their neighbors, although with considerably more insecurity and a shorter life span.⁴¹

Wherever they are present, *quadrilhas* have become the de facto rulers of the community, responsible for maintaining order and ensuring the smooth operation of the trade within their territories. In some cases gang members infiltrated existing political organizations, taking over neighborhood associations or co-opting their leaders.⁴² In others they simply inserted themselves into preexisting patronage structures within the community, becoming in effect a local authority whose rule is enforced by violence.⁴³ Like the traditional *patrão* (patron) drug factions in these marginalized neighborhoods provide important economic and social services that the state has failed to deliver: funding urban improvements, providing material assistance to individual community members, and sponsoring leisure activities like dances, barbecues, and soccer clubs. In communities that have a long history of antagonistic relations with the police and other authorities *quadrilhas* also provide a form of local policing, protecting their territories from intruders and bandits, resolving local disputes, and enforcing communal standards of behavior.

This, along with the fact that many gang members were born and raised in the community, has ensured a degree of tolerance and tacit support among residents, who often see the rule of the *quadrilha* as preferable to the state's provision of public security. In what is otherwise perceived as a troubling situation, residents often cite the *quadrilhas'* ability to provide stability and order as positive aspects of their domination.⁴⁴ Nevertheless theirs is an authoritarian rule backed by the use of force, and the threat of violence is never far from the surface. As one *favela* resident interviewed by Luke Dowdney and researchers for Viva Rio, the largest nongovernmental agency working in the *favelas* of Rio, explained, "It's a false security. Nobody really feels safe."⁴⁵ Although the presence of local gangs may be perceived as useful for reasons of community defense or the enforcement of social order, residents also view the situation with a great deal of ambivalence.

In what has become a vicious cycle, the presence of heavily armed drug trafficking factions also exposes *favela* residents to the brutality of the state as it struggles to regain territorial control of these areas. Pursuing a policy of military engagement that treats them as enemy territory, the government regularly deploys military police to invade and temporarily occupy particular *favelas*. On these occasions the police's objectives are limited and tactical: to apprehend a particular suspect or conduct a

raid rather than to systematically eradicate illegal activities or implement a comprehensive program of public security. Indeed given the involvement of corrupt police and other authorities in various aspects of the drug trade, its eradication is unlikely without major reforms in governmental structures as well as in Brazil's notoriously inefficient justice system.⁴⁶

Greatly detested and feared by *favela* residents, the military police, who in the bipartite policing system of Brazil are responsible for public security and order, have a history of corruption, extrajudicial killings, torture, and abusive relations with the poor.⁴⁷ It is common knowledge that a number of police officers are complicit in the trade, receiving bribes or a percentage of drug profits, selling smuggled or stolen arms to traffickers, confiscating drugs and arms from one community and selling them in another, and even kidnapping traffickers for ransom.⁴⁸ Police incursions into *favelas* frequently result in the killing of innocent civilians who are caught in the crossfire, mistaken for traffickers, or simply assassinated as undesirables.⁴⁹

So pervasive are incidents of police brutality that international organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch consistently rank police violence against civilians as one of Brazil's "most systemic, widespread, and longstanding human rights concerns, disproportionately affecting the country's poorest and most vulnerable populations."⁵⁰ Interviews with *favela* residents suggest that the state's strategy of violent and repressive policing actually reinforces the community's alliance with the drug factions as a protective force, thereby reconfirming the public's perception of these areas as criminal enclaves.⁵¹ Thus in spite of vigorous protest against police brutality by local and international groups, the image of the *favela* as a socially marginal area under the control of violent criminals—an image that is normalized by media reports and everyday discourse—means that there continues to be widespread and popular support for forceful intervention by the state.⁵²

In the dominant narrative proffered by public authorities and other interested parties, the institutionalization of the drug trade in Rio's *favelas*—made possible in part by the *favela*'s long history of official exclusion—is merely the latest chapter in a long history of criminality rather than part of an international chain of supply and demand for a drug whose consumers are drawn overwhelmingly from the middle and upper classes and whose institutionalization involves the complicity of businessmen and state authorities at various levels. The mainstream media reproduces this familiar story line in headlines that consistently link the *favela* with

drug trafficking, violence, and immoral behavior of various sorts. This simplistic thinking doesn't describe reality fully or accurately, but organizes and classifies it symbolically in ways that legitimate the violence of the state and the continued marginalization of *favela* inhabitants. No longer officially classified as illegal, the *favela*'s persistent status as morally illicit now serves as the dominant justification for the state's prejudicial treatment of its inhabitants.

ACARI

Acari, like most areas in Rio where the drug trade has taken root, has experienced cycles of violence and relative calm over the past two decades. In the 1990s it was considered one of Rio's most deadly neighborhoods, home to the city's busiest *boca de fumo* ("mouth of fire," the public point of sale for illicit drugs) and infamous for the *chacina de Acari*, a massacre of eleven young people by armed men with ties to the police, an event that became internationally known when a group called the Mothers of Acari sought the return of their children's bodies and justice for their killers.⁵³ In 1996 it was the site of a massive invasion by the police, who temporarily occupied the area in an ostensible effort to quell drug trafficking. As is typically the case, their presence suppressed the more visible signs of the trade but did not eradicate it.⁵⁴

By 2000, when I was traveling to Acari regularly, the police had moved on to other parts of the city, leaving the area to the local *quadrilha*, and the neighborhood was enjoying a period of relative tranquility. Nevertheless there was a sense among residents that the ground had shifted and troubling cracks in the social foundation lay just beneath the placid façade of everyday normalcy. As I spent more time in Acari I began to perceive the ways that Nazaré and her family negotiated the unwritten rules that governed their world and attempted to create a sense of order, comfort, and security when these things could no longer be taken for granted.

Conversations about the past hinted at the deep malaise that the drug trade had generated. Nazaré was not the only long-term resident with whom I spoke who obliquely commented on the transformations that had altered the neighborhood; she spoke with obvious nostalgia of a past remembered as carefree and characterized by a sense of safety and sociability. In particular, changes in public space and the quality of social interactions were felt acutely. Houses that once had been open to the street were now fortified by high walls and chained gates. People were more suspicious of strangers and less likely to linger on the street chatting with

a neighbor or to sit in their doorstep for a breath of fresh air. Taking a walk around the neighborhood for exercise or pleasure, once a popular pastime, was now considered unwise. Among those old enough to remember a different time, the formerly vibrant byways of Acari had become dangerous spaces occupied by people in transit rather than places of public sociability and leisure. As people took refuge behind the walls separating their houses from the street, social interactions shriveled and suspicions grew.⁵⁵ Such alterations of the social fabric appear to be common in neighborhoods dominated by the drug trade and have been documented by researchers working in different areas of the city.⁵⁶

Much of the disquiet and free-floating anxiety that Nazaré and others expressed was voiced indirectly, in oblique or coded ways. For example, the head of the local *quadrilha* was never referred to by name but only as *o dono* (the boss) or simply *o cara* (the guy). Conversations alluding to the traffickers included phrases such as *lá em cima* (“up there,” a reference to the fact that the local basis of operations was located on the highest hill in the locale) or with a slight nod of the head upward. Mostly, though, people tried to avoid any reference to the drug trade or the traffickers, many of whom had grown up in the neighborhood. Whether their reticence was motivated by fear, disapproval, or simply discretion, people were loath to talk about the dangerous elephant that had taken up residence in their midst.⁵⁷

Instead there was a pervasive sense that the *rua*, the street itself, was the principal source of danger. “Não fique na rua,” Nazaré would caution the child whom she sent to buy her cigarettes at the *birosca* down the street, admonishing him or her to return directly and not linger in the street. Except for these errands, Nazaré seldom allowed her youngest children to play outside, and when she did, they were restricted to the immediate vicinity of the small patch of broken asphalt directly in front of the house while she or another adult watched from the doorway. Even my own short walk to and from the train station was cause for concern, and Nazaré frequently dispatched her son to accompany me as I returned to the station for the train ride home or drove me the three blocks herself when she had a car.

Although it is true that the street had become a place of sporadic shootouts between local traffickers and their enemies, the perception of the street, and public space more generally, as a realm of indeterminate dangers did not emerge *ex nihilo*. Rather the trade has deepened and exacerbated long-standing conceptual linkages that separate house from street. Unlike the more affluent, who have withdrawn to exclusive neighborhoods with state-of-the-art security, residents of Rio’s poor and

working-class neighborhoods are forced to deal with the dangers posed by the street in other ways. The chaotic nature of the trade has amplified residents' feelings of insecurity, of inhabiting a world that is out of their control, an environment in which age-old methods for dealing with insecurity and strife are applied to new situations. Thus not only do residents seek the protection of more powerful patrons, but they also actively pursue religious methods of protecting themselves: appealing to spirit guardians or tutelary saints, using amulets or protective charms, and conducting propitiatory rituals.

Some find order in evangelical Christianity, especially in the Pentecostal denominations that have flourished in poor neighborhoods throughout Brazil and Latin America in the past thirty years. As scholars studying this phenomenon have noted, evangelical Christianity proposes a vision of the world divided into opposing forces of good and evil, with conversion symbolizing rejection of the past and the promise of a new life free of sin and vice.⁵⁸ By imposing strict standards of dress, behavior, and family life on their members these groups provide a model of the virtuous life and a tight-knit community that enfolds the convert within a new social network. These groups also offer participants an unambiguous sense of moral culpability and its consequences, as well as a divine figure who is actively involved in the lives of his followers. But what scholars sometimes have overlooked is that in addition to providing participants with an orderly world, belonging to these evangelical groups also offers poor and working-class people a way to publicly perform their status as morally upright citizens, as the anthropologist Donna Goldstein observed. In a tropical climate where both men and women favor dress styles that reveal the body, *crentes* (evangelicals) are immediately identifiable by their conservative dress, women in long skirts and loose-fitting tops and men in slacks, button-down shirts, and ties.⁵⁹

In her wide-ranging study of race, sexuality, and violence in Rio's *favelas*, Goldstein speculated that part of the appeal of evangelical Christianity for young female residents in particular is the fact that church standards for dress and behavior function as "a protective symbol of neutrality and nonparticipation in the escalating violence" that has affected many of these neighborhoods.⁶⁰ With their modest dress, female *crentes* communicate to bystanders not only their moral character and noninvolvement in drug circles, but their unavailability as potential girlfriends or wives to anyone but other *crentes*. Their visible status as evangelicals, Goldstein argued, may even offer some protection against the violence wrought by the trade.

Although I know of no statistics to prove it, I suspect that the popularity of Umbanda's *povo da rua*, frequently invoked for protection against the chaos of the street, also may be a response to social changes in Rio. Nazaré, for example, was emphatic that only the protection of the spirits and her own maternal vigilance had safeguarded her family from harm. As proof she cited the fact that each of her three oldest children knew of a school colleague or neighborhood playmate who had been drawn into the trade, either directly or indirectly, only to meet a violent end. "I keep my spirits well fed," she concluded, "so that my children are shielded from trouble, no matter where they are. I count on the force of the spirits, of Molambo, who looks out for me and wages battle on my behalf." By actively cultivating spirits of the street like Maria Molambo, Nazaré worked to direct their powers against the dangers posed by the unpredictable streets of Acari.

Spiritual protection does not function as an invisible shield repelling the evil or violent intentions of others, however, but requires the active cooperation of those who fall under its mantle. Nazaré's eldest daughter, Marisa, learned that lesson when she disobeyed Maria Molambo's explicit warning and attended a neighborhood *baile funk*,⁶¹ where she got involved in a *confusão* (confusion or skirmish) after being mistaken for a trafficker's errant girlfriend. She was detained for several hours and beaten by gang members, who eventually realized their mistake and released her. Thoroughly shaken by that experience, Marisa vowed never again to disobey Molambo. For her part Nazaré was convinced that a far worse fate would have befallen Marisa had not Molambo been looking after her.

In addition to ensuring her spirits' protection through faithful ritual attention, Nazaré endeavored to maintain a relationship of respectful distance with the local *quadrilha*, whose members closely monitored life within the neighborhood as part of their defense against the incursion of rival gangs and police. As a matter of prudence she always asked their permission when she was planning a large *feira* in honor of the spirits, for these events could draw a hundred people or more, and such a large crowd would be sure to attract the attention of the gang headquartered on the small hill overlooking her street. At first this seemed to me more a token courtesy and gesture of deference rather than an actual request for the gang leader's permission, but one year the preparations for Maria Molambo's annual gala were stalled for a time while Nazaré negotiated for the right to set off fireworks, customarily used by drug factions in Rio to announce the entrance of police into their territory. After some

back-and-forth, permission was granted on the condition that she refrain from using anything other than low-intensity fireworks.

When, as she claimed happened on occasion, a gang member appeared at Nazaré's *terreiro* seeking a ritual work for protection or other spiritual service, she politely declined. Given the domination of the neighborhood by the *quadrilha*, her refusal might seem unwise, but she maintained that her decision was backed by the will of the spirits. "How can I ask the spirits, who only work for the good of all human beings," she explained to me, "how can I ask them to work for a person who robs, a person who kills? If [that person] insists, I tell him to go to the crossroads and light a candle and ask what he will, but he cannot enter a house of saints." She continued, "I don't believe that the spirits accept those who rob and kill. If they don't accept them, then why do I have to accept them? I have to coexist with the *bandidos*, yes, but I don't have to help them. I have never opened my door to them."

When I asked if she had ever suffered any consequences for refusing the traffickers, she replied, "No, no. They respect me. I have never had a problem with them. They might rule the streets, but their rule ends at my doorway." In emphasizing the difference of jurisdiction between the world of the streets and that of the home, Nazaré alluded to the different structures of authority particular to each sphere, a distinction that organizes not only social spaces and people's interactions within those spaces, but the spiritual world as well. By manipulating her own spirits of the streets Nazaré sought to counter the rule of the traffickers as she outwardly conceded to it. In contrast to the real world outside her doorway, she has been able, through careful ritual attention, to transform her relationship with an unpredictable and potentially destructive spirit of the street like Maria Molambo into a beneficial one.

Others with whom I spoke shared Nazaré's pragmatic attitude about the drug trade. All accepted the traffickers as a force in the neighborhood with which they had to coexist, but none saw their authority as legitimate. Yet many preferred their rule to that of the police, the most visible representative of the state's authority. "The police are much worse than the traffickers," I was told. "The police come in here shooting. They don't respect the residents. To them, we are all *bandidos*." Researchers who have interviewed *favela* residents about the impact of the drug trade in their neighborhoods report similar attitudes; most prefer the unofficial system of order provided by the drug traffickers to the official system represented by the police, which they experience as indiscriminately violent and corrupt.⁶²

Distrust of the police is widespread in Rio de Janeiro among all social classes, due largely to institutionalized corruption and the involvement of off-duty police officers in death squads targeting homeless youth and poor adolescents suspected of involvement in narcotrafficking or other criminal activities. But whereas the upper and middle classes seldom are the direct victims of police corruption and extrajudicial killings, *favela* residents often are. Their distrust of the police is coupled with outrage at what they see as police officers' lack of respect for their lives and livelihoods. A *favela* resident interviewed by Dowdney expressed a perspective shared by my friends in Acari: "The police don't respect anyone that lives in the favela. Those that live in the favela are not worth anything. To them there is no such thing as an honest worker [living in the favela]."⁶³

I myself had a brief glimpse of the disdain directed at *favela* residents by police one afternoon when, sitting on the second-story veranda of Nazaré's house, we watched a Jeep full of heavily armed military police slowly circle the neighborhood, observing residents through the scopes of their automatic rifles. It was a naked display of power and menacing contempt that seemed calculated not to reassure those who witnessed it of the state's protection, but to remind them of their status as a criminalized class bereft of the basic rights of citizenship enjoyed by the wealthy residents of Rio's *bairros nobres* ("noble" or elite neighborhoods). When placed in the context of the police's routine treatment of *favela* inhabitants, which includes coerced confession, extortion, torture, and summary execution, this incident can be seen as one of the more subtle examples of the institutionalized brutalization of the poor whereby policing functions as a means of social control. In the next chapter I explore some of the effects of these prejudicial attitudes and practices on those who are their target.

Sexuality, Morality, and the Logic of Gender

Transmitted by socialization and internalization, buttressed by appeals to “custom” and “tradition” and reinforced by mechanisms of social surveillance and control, gendered norms of respectability often become the basis for local and even national moral and social orders. Thus when women (or men) overstep these boundaries, whether intentionally or unintentionally, they not only challenge dominant norms of gendered behavior, but threaten the moral foundations of society.

—Dorothy L. Hodgson and Sheryl A. McCurdy, eds., “Wicked”
Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa

The dominated do not have an alternative repertoire for thinking of themselves but must usually make sense of their own world and experience with the language by which they are discriminated against.

—Teresa P. R. Caldeira, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo*

STIGMA AND THE MORAL TOPOGRAPHY OF LIFE ON THE *PERIFERIA*

In the contemptuous gaze of the police we may see not just an example of repressive policing, but a reminder that *favela* residents, in the eyes of a larger and more powerful public, inhabit the very periphery of the human community. Beyond the real problems of poverty, inadequate urban infrastructure, and violence that residents of these areas face, the

perception of the *favela* as a perversion of the larger social, moral, and economic order has created its own stigma, reinforcing the social distance between *favela* populations and inhabitants of Rio's wealthier neighborhoods.

The social consequences of this stigma are far-reaching. Among other things it compromises residents' ability to find employment and affects their interactions with outsiders, who, many believe, see them as "ignorant *favelados*," or more perniciously, *os marginais*, the marginalized, a designation that carries the negative connotation of being a criminal or an outlaw.¹ On a deeper level this stigma also shapes how residents make sense of their own world and complicates any attempt to construct an identity untainted by the negative associations of living in a *favela*.

The sociologist Erving Goffman first defined *stigma* as a socially constructed relationship whereby certain differences among human beings are invested with negative significance such that they become socially and psychologically damaging to the person or group who possesses them.² The particular attributes defined as discrediting vary across cultures, but always they are perceived to deviate from the norms of the society in question and therefore to constitute an implicit threat to the presumed naturalness of its order. As a result stigmatized individuals or groups are subject to various processes of social exclusion. In other words, stigma behaves as a kind of social contamination in which negative stereotypes compromise the stigmatized individual's (or group's) identity while simultaneously engendering various means of prophylaxis by the larger society.

In her work on poverty and child death in the Brazilian Northeast, Nancy Scheper-Hughes described *stigma* as "a language of human relationships that relates self to other, normal to abnormal, healthy to sick, strong to weak. It involves all those exclusionary, dichotomous contradictions that allow us to draw safe boundaries around the acceptable, the permissible, the desirable, so as to contain our own fears and phobias about sickness, death and decay, madness and violence, sexuality and chaos."³ Scheper-Hughes's description highlights the function of stigma as a boundary marker in projects of identity construction and in the production of relational categories by which people judge others as normal or aberrant. Some of the most potent of these categories draw on the language of morality, of what is right, proper, decent, or good—and, by contrast, what is abhorrent. In the symbolic language with which *cariocas* navigate the geographic and social space of their city, the *periferia* (periphery) has become metonymic of moral disorder. It is the boundary,

literal and figurative, that divides civilization from chaos in the public imaginary.

When social and economic relationships are recast along an imaginary axis of center and periphery, geographical space can also become freighted with moral significance. The *periferia* thus designates not just a geographic locale but also an associated nexus of social, economic, and moral conditions. Anyone who has spent significant time in Brazil inevitably will have been warned of the *periferia*, a term that identifies not only the perimeter of urban space but also the marginal conditions believed to prevail there. In its most narrow usage, *periferia* refers to the shantytowns and blocks of low-income housing that have sprouted around the edges of Rio de Janeiro and other urban centers in Brazil. More broadly *periferia* denotes a boundary zone, frontier, or hinterland, but like all liminal terminology it lends itself to a web of referents expanding its meaning beyond the purely spatial to encompass both the moral and social connotations of life on the edge: marginality, lawlessness, immorality, chaos. It is often used as a synonym for *favela*, although not all *favelas* are located on the urban periphery.

Both outsiders and insiders view the *periferia* as a locus of danger, a place of crime, sexual transgression, and violence (particularly the violence associated with the drug traffic)—in short, everything that threatens commonplace notions of social order.⁴ When Brazilian friends learned that I was traveling to the periphery regularly to conduct my research their immediate reaction was concern for my welfare. Most could not imagine why a middle-class white woman, let alone a foreigner, would choose to regularly visit Acari, and many seemed convinced that it was only a matter of time before I was raped, robbed, or worse. In fact I was the victim of a crime on three occasions while living in Rio, but each occurred in the affluent Zona Sul, where foreigners and tourists are conspicuous targets for petty thieves. Nevertheless, people warned me of the dangers of Acari and advised me to avoid venturing there at night.⁵

One could dismiss these concerns as displaced fears, which I did, but the language employed by my well-meaning friends illustrates the prevailing significance of the *periferia* for many Brazilians. Their warnings suggest a series of morally loaded contrasts separating the center from the periphery, the decent and respectable from the licentious and dangerous. Rape and robbery are imagined to be commonplace events in the *periferia*, perversions of legitimate sexual relations and modes of exchange that only hint at the dangers that lie in wait for decent, respectable

people who, unwittingly or not, venture there. Implied in these terms is a sense of the morally abject, the domain of all that must be excluded for order and good yet whose very existence gives these notions their conceptual relevance.

My friends' apprehensions were not altogether unfounded, given the presence of drug traffickers and the possibility of shootouts with the police or other rivals. Yet the alarm that the *periferia* inspires goes beyond these practical concerns. Above all it is this sense of the *periferia* as morally perverted that animates the contagious fear with which outsiders see it. This fear is not limited to those who merely envision the *periferia* from their comfortable perch in the middle class: even Nazaré was convinced that I must have "strong protection" since I circulated at will, regularly toting expensive camera equipment along the route that led from the train station to her temple.

Nazaré's own concern for my safety illustrates the pervasiveness of the image of the periphery as chaotic and violent, an image that is partially grounded in real social conditions but that extends well beyond these conditions, as the implied connection with moral perversion suggests. Residents often warned me that the area was dangerous, and they themselves took care to avoid certain areas, particularly those known to be associated with *bandidos*. In an ethnographic study of Acari, the anthropologist Marcos Alvito found that aside from traveling to and from work, school, church, or visits to other family members, residents seldom venture far from their homes, and the circulation of persons between neighborhoods is surprisingly small.⁶ Because they share the normative view of the periphery as sinister, residents are constrained to continually differentiate themselves from the various forms of marginality associated with it. "We are poor, but we are decent" was a common refrain that I heard, employed to displace the perceived danger of immoral and antisocial elements onto unnamed others. And there is always a more unfortunate other, even among those who find themselves near the bottom of the social scale.

These understandings and practices further substantiate the *periferia* as a marginal space inhabited by marginal people, a domain in which marginality itself may be understood to function as what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called a "structuring structure."⁷ That is, the perception of marginality attached to the periphery creates a set of conditions and expectations that structures the way its inhabitants understand the social environment and their place within it. This marginality is experienced as stigmatizing: inhabitants of the periphery must constantly ne-

gotiate this stigma in their dealings both with the outside world and with each other. Here the repeated use of the term *decent* as a means of differentiation is revealing, for it implies a state of moral propriety and respectability that must be constantly asserted and defended.⁸

DEFINING AND DEFENDING DECENCY

As a concept and a shared moral value, decency is defined by proper conduct, behavior that conforms to certain standards of acceptability. It is an attribute that identifies the socially included, those who are both respected and respectable, and is assessed according to a number of locally meaningful social coordinates, including residence, employment, and behavioral codes that differ according to gender.

Although an individual's ability to embody or transgress the standards of decency is an explicit topic of conversation, the underlying schema itself operates as part of the taken-for-granted structure of the world, a set of internalized standards that are normalized within the flow of everyday life and whose rightness is seldom subject to explicit reflection. Despite the fact that they often felt the sting of this prejudice themselves, Nazaré and other residents of Acari with whom I talked shared the view that a person's socioeconomic condition and physical place of residence reflected his or her moral worth. Keenly aware of their own marginal status in the eyes of the larger society, Acari's residents simultaneously distinguished themselves from their neighbors by employing the very same categories of stigma that were applied to them.

As an illustrative example, I am reminded of my initial puzzlement when, in response to a query about the location of her *terreiro*, Nazaré informed me that it was not located within the *favela* per se, but rather at the foot of the *morro*, or hill (a term often used in place of the symbolically freighted *favela*). By specifying its position at the bottom of the hill, the site of a paved road lined by sturdily built homes, Nazaré positioned her temple and residence as part of the *asfalto* and not, as I naïvely had assumed, part of the *favela* itself—a critical distinction for her, but one that left me befuddled. Accustomed to thinking about the entire area as a *favela*, I did not at first understand the salience of her description.

More than indicating differences in geographical space and the built environment, distinctions such as that between the *asfalto* and the *favela* were elements within a local moral topography that structured people's understanding of their own status in relationship to others. In other

words, this and other categorical oppositions were part of a naturalized schema of identity construction that positioned the self in relation to other bodies and spaces, each evaluated according to its putative moral status. By plotting geographical, physical, and economic characteristics along symbolically significant axes of morality, inhabitants of the periphery positioned themselves as decent.

Nazaré and others who lived within the *asfalto* considered themselves superior to the inhabitants of more precarious areas, who were marked as socially and sexually transgressive and commonly described as *bandidos*, *indigentes* (indigents), *mendigos* (beggars), *ladrões* (crooks), and *vagabundas* (loose women). Here again the disorderly physical space of the *favela*, with its irregular dirt lanes and cramped, metal-roofed shacks, signaled the social disorderliness of its inhabitants, who were described in terms that marked them as immoral and even criminal. Within the local moral topography, their place of residence and socioeconomic status positioned them as indecent.

GENDERED NOTIONS OF RESPECTABILITY

One of the most important social coordinates of decency is a good reputation and the respect that it ensures, measured by an individual's ability to actualize a range of ideals that differ according to gender.⁹ Especially among Nazaré's generation, those who came of age before organized political and social movements of the 1970s and 1980s began to seriously question normative social arrangements, this traditional understanding of gender persists as a model to be emulated, if seldom fully realized. As a system of behavioral ideals for men and women it provides not so much a blueprint to be rigidly followed as a set of concepts and a vocabulary with which people negotiate their own reputation and assess that of others.¹⁰ It serves, in other words, as a kind of "cultural grammar" that exerts a pervasive and regulatory influence over everyday life, structuring other kinds of social interactions.¹¹

This is not to say that people don't reject or flout gender norms in various ways, or that more "modern" understandings of gender are absent among residents of the urban periphery. The past several decades in Brazil have witnessed accelerating and uneven processes of development accompanied by political and social changes that have transformed life in many ways, creating new opportunities for women in the public sphere and contributing to the emergence of new family structures, sexual subcultures, personal freedoms, and forms of gendered and sexual

self-expression. Television in particular has disseminated norms, values, and behaviors related to gender that tend to be more fluid and permissive, particularly in regard to female roles.¹² Yet in the absence of real opportunities for achieving the lifestyle portrayed on television, these alternatives tend to coexist with rather than displace more traditional patterns, which continue to organize people's everyday experience of the world and their assigned place within it. The inevitable contradictions that arise produce many of the problems treated by *zeladores* like Nazaré.

Traditionally men gain respect by performing the role of the *macho*, that brave, virile, patriarchal ideal who is the head of the household and the provider for his family. Thus a man is expected to materially provide for his wife and children (or mistresses and children); display his bravery where necessary, particularly in defending his family and reputation; and demonstrate his virility, measured in the number of children he has sired and the number of his sexual conquests. Men who do not contribute to the household by providing material support, especially for their own offspring, are likely to have their reputation vigorously impugned by their neighbors, men and women alike.¹³

At the same time that he is expected to confirm his virility, a man is also expected to control the sexuality of the women living in his household. This should not be confused with the cult of female virginity (or chastity) characteristic of other patriarchal societies; in urban Brazil in particular there is little expectation for women to remain virgins until marriage and few sanctions outside of the immediate family for women who lose their virginity before marriage. Yet like these other societies, a daughter's sexuality remains under the aegis of her father or brothers while she resides in the paternal household.¹⁴ Because legal marriages are rare in poor and working-class communities (although they remain a social ideal), the rights of a man over his female partner are established and endure only for the period in which they cohabit. Once a young woman has left the paternal household to establish her own domestic arrangements, her father or brothers cease to be concerned with her sexual conduct, which now enhances or threatens the reputation of her partner.

Poor and working-class women are deemed respectable largely based on two criteria: their role as wives, household managers, and mothers, and their sexual fidelity, measured largely by a woman's seclusion to the domestic sphere and avoidance of excessive socialization with unrelated males. For a woman, a good reputation determines not only her integration within or exclusion from peer networks, but also may affect her

conjugal life.¹⁵ For example, a woman who is thought to spend too much time outside the home, neglecting her duties to children or husband, may be subject to various forms of censure, from deleterious gossip to social ostracism to physical beatings administered by a dissatisfied spouse.¹⁶ She is likely to be referred to as a *vagabunda* (tramp) or *puta* (whore), terms that connote sexual promiscuity. As this suggests, a woman's sexual reputation often has less to do with her actual sexual behavior or experiences than with what people believe about her based on judgments of her behavior, color, class or the reputation of her family.¹⁷

Because their social reputations are closely associated with the role of mother and housewife, most young women that I met were anxious to *se casar* (to marry or establish a household) and begin their own family, quintessential feminine aspirations continually reinforced by family members, popular culture, and children's games. Whereas Nazaré's grandson spent his time kicking around a makeshift soccer ball with his male cousins and imagined a future as a soccer star, his little sister dreamed of marrying a rich husband and becoming a *dona-de-casa*, or housewife. People of both sexes with whom I spoke saw marriage or cohabitation as normative, especially for women, and interpreted the increasing number of female-headed households as symptomatic of larger-scale social problems and evidence of a decline in moral standards rather than a conscious lifestyle choice. They perceived single women on their own as loose, if not actual prostitutes. As one researcher of gender mores among the urban poor put it, "A woman without a husband disturbs the peace of the community. She challenges the virility of men and activates the jealousy of women."¹⁸ Accordingly a common pattern among poor and working-class women is serial cohabitation with various male partners.¹⁹ Households composed of several generations of extended family members, like Nazaré's, also are common.

FEMININITY, DOMESTICITY, AND WOMEN'S WORK

Even though it is seen as undesirable, economic realities often require that women work outside the home. For older women, domestic work as a nanny, caregiver, or house cleaner, preferably in the wealthier neighborhoods of the Zona Sul, is common. Because such jobs require a lengthy commute and many hours away from home and children, some women prefer *serviço em casa*, work that can be done inside the home or in its immediate environs without compromising domestic routines, such as

laundry, sewing, piecework, or making snacks to be sold on the street. Younger women tend to be employed in the service industry as manicurists, clerks, salesgirls, secretaries, or receptionists.

Nazaré herself held a salaried job only once, as a clerk at an optometrist's lab, much to her husband's dissatisfaction. The birth of their first child ended that brief foray into the world of wage labor, and since that time Nazaré has eschewed the formal job market. Nonetheless she regularly has engaged in a bit of unofficial commerce, buying various products at wholesale and selling them to friends and passersby from a small, street-side kiosk or selling prepared foodstuffs from a street cart. The informal and flexible nature of such work permits her to exercise a firm hand in the day-to-day running of her household, which includes numerous children, grandchildren, and, from time to time, *filhos-de-santo* whom she has taken under her wing.

In this respect Nazaré is quite typical; among the vast majority of poor and working-class inhabitants of the urban periphery the sphere of women's work, particularly for married women, remains the home.²⁰ The culture of machismo, pervasive throughout Brazil, seems to be most intense among the poor and working classes, who are least equipped financially to uphold its traditional standards of appropriate gender roles. Unable to position themselves as dominant in the public realm of economic success, many poor and working-class men assert their dominance in the household, exercising the traditional male prerogative of authority over women and children. In Nazaré's social world men do not engage in either household chores or child care, and women expect that their husband's primary contribution to the household will be financial.²¹ Thus Nazaré maintained that, despite the fact that Nilmar paid little attention to his family and was rarely home, he was a "good head of the household" because "his children never lacked anything." Women of Nazaré's age whom I met measured the health of their relationship by their husband's level of economic participation and expressed little expectation for emotional intimacy or companionship.

A woman's primary duties, regardless of whether or not she works outside of the home, center on taking care of house, children, and husband. Popular sentiment holds that wives who work outside the home come in regular contact with other men and thus the opportunity for infidelity. Nazaré once explained to me why Nilmar did not want her to work outside the home in the following way: "All my life with him, he thought that—men looked at me a lot because I was very pretty—so

he thought that men would see me and their passions would be aroused.” Her remarks suggest another dimension of gender relations: the presumption that men are unable to control their passions in the presence of a beautiful woman and that women are unable to resist the overtures of an inflamed man. Here men are constructed as active, women as passive, yet the responsibility for any sexual transgression compromises the reputation not of the man presumed to be the sexual aggressor, but of the woman—and by extension her husband’s reputation. There is thus a strong sense, particularly among men, that wives ought to stay at home, safe from the aggressive sexuality of other men.²²

Marcos Alvito noted that many of his male friends took evident pride in describing their wives as *muito caseira*, an expression that loosely translates as “homebodies,” that is, women who rarely leave the home, particularly for evening or leisure-time pursuits. By emphasizing their wives’ unwillingness to go out, these men implicitly affirmed their fidelity; a man whose wife is thought to *fica na rua* (be out on the streets; literally to stay on the street) is sure to be a source of neighborhood comment. Yet while their wives remained hidden at home, Alvito observed that husbands “circulate with total liberty. In groups or singly, the heads of families are on the street sometimes until dawn, frequenting dances and *forrós*.”²³ This was a pattern that I also noted; whereas men tended to spend their leisure time in public spaces drinking and socializing with their buddies, women gathered inside or in the immediate environs of their dwellings, often surrounded by children.

The locus of female social space is thus the domestic domain or its frontier, the doorway in which women often are found exchanging gossip and advice with female kin and neighbors. Men, by contrast, have a wider social circle upon which to draw; the space in which they develop ties of *companheirismo* (companionship) and friendship is the street, with its numerous bars, kiosks, and other centers of male sociability where men are free to fraternize with other unrelated men. Whether discussing the game, sharing a beer after work, or simply loitering, men predominate in the public space of the street and its establishments in a way that women conspicuously do not. When women do appear in public they are typically in transit: going to or from the market, accompanying children to school or church, or fulfilling some domestic task. Women’s presence on the street, although not unusual, is almost always transient, and those who linger too long are suspected of being “loose,” if not actual prostitutes.

Even as men boast about how much their wives like to stay at home, from the female point of view the decision to stay close to home may not be an entirely free one. Nazaré expressed a sentiment shared by other women with whom I spoke: “I was never one to go out to dances, nightclubs, staying out on the street. Nothing like that. I never go out. My husband can go out, stay out at night socializing on the street, do whatever he wants, but his wife, no. I love the night, but if I were to go out, there would be an argument. He would want to know where I went, who I was with, who I talked to. So I don’t even go out. It’s not worth having an argument.” Of course not all men are intent on secluding their wives at home, and not all women feel trapped by domesticity. Nevertheless DaMatta’s dialectic of *casa* and *rua*, house and street, clearly demarcates a gendered division of social space that, though only partly contiguous with the actual physical spaces of streets and buildings, associates women with the domestic domain of the home and men with the public domain of street life, the locus of male sociability.

The gendered nature of public and private space is so pervasive that it is largely taken as self-evident, being imbibed from early childhood on. Male children play outside, largely unmonitored by their female caregivers, where they fly homemade kites, kick around a stone or ball, and engage in ad hoc soccer matches. Female children, by contrast, usually are expected to stay indoors, playing with cousins or dolls or helping in domestic tasks. Girls will often be put in charge of other youngsters, and it is not unusual to see a child of eight or nine with a baby on her hip running an errand for her mother. In short, the very fabric of daily life, from children’s games to forms of socializing to work patterns, ensures the perpetuation of a symbolic schema of gendered space in ways that are utterly mundane and taken for granted.

SEXUALITY, MORALITY, AND THE LOGIC OF GENDER

Although they are in constant interaction, the spheres of *casa* and *rua* are structured by associated norms, values, and codes of behavior, the transgressions of which carry a moral sanction. This is most particularly apparent in the norms regulating sexual relationships. It is here that the hierarchical logic of gender roles becomes most apparent. Although this logic is fluid and subject to mitigating conditions, such as the relative affluence, status, educational level, and personal inclinations of the people involved, it continues to organize the basic structures of daily life at its

most basic level: the organization of space and of bodies within space. In this way a hierarchical system of gender has come to be part of the taken-for-granted character of the lived world, a second nature that, as in Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus*, constantly and implicitly adjusts behaviors and expectations to structures.²⁴

As is the case for all such schemas of practical sense, the governing principles of the system may be most clearly apprehended in cases where they are, wittingly or not, transgressed. Consider the fact that a woman who spends too much time "on the street" is likely to be called "vulgar" or "loose." Alternatively she may be accused of having "low morals" or even of being a prostitute. The common thread in these accusations is that they represent conduct that has been invested with a moral-sexual stigma. The underlying logic links moral female sexuality to the home and the domestic sphere, that is, the family. Traditionally modesty, chastity, and fidelity constituted the behavioral standards for this domesticated female sexuality, ensured through a wife's (or daughter's) relegation to the home and avoidance of the street. With the rise of a more recent ideology extolling female sexuality as liberating (derived in part from the unlikely conjuncture of feminism and consumerist culture) this understanding of the virtuous woman has ceased to be hegemonic. Nevertheless because they are embedded in the very spatial organization and structure of daily life, traditional gender norms continue to be operative.

To illustrate, immoral female sexuality continues to be associated with the street, that is, the public sphere in which men circulate with impunity. Opposed to the domestic sphere, the street is both associated with and the locus of unfettered social intercourse. A *mulher da rua* (woman of the street) is a woman whose sexuality either is not confined to the domestic sphere and the conjugal family, contravenes that of wife and mother, or is not under the control of a husband. In this sense the prostitute is a transgressive figure: she undermines a system of gender that confines women to the role of wife and mother, and female sexuality to the domestic sphere. By confounding this structural alignment of gender, sexuality, and social space, the prostitute is branded immoral. The quintessential woman of the street—the antithesis of the virtuous wife and mother—is embodied, of course, in the figure of Pomba Gira, the immoral woman par excellence.

The social importance of a husband's ostensible control over the sexuality of his wife, instituted through her subjection to the domestic sphere, becomes even more evident in the case of female adultery.²⁵ Here the

social stigma is greater for the *corno*, or cuckolded husband, than for his adulterous wife. The anthropologists Claudia Fonseca and L. A. Rebhun both observed in other places in Brazil a pattern similar to what I observed in Acari: while female modesty and chastity remained the standards for virtuous wifely behavior, in general an adulterous woman suffered less pernicious gossip than did her husband, for whom female adultery represented “the most shameful situation possible.”²⁶ The issue is not so much that an adulterous woman has had sex with a man other than her husband, but that in so doing she has contravened her husband’s exclusive claim to her sexuality and thus compromised his masculinity. Sex in itself is not seen as immoral or shameful, but subversion of the implicit hierarchy of gender connected with sexuality is. By challenging her husband’s exclusive claim to her sexuality, an adulterous woman publicly calls into question his masculinity. Hence although an adulterous wife is never lauded for her actions, the social stigma affects her cuckolded husband to a greater degree.

Fonseca discerned that by manipulating the threat of adultery and in gossip about cuckolds, women successfully exploited this male vulnerability to their advantage.²⁷ She also found that among her female informants, attitudes toward the adulteress were tempered by the recognition that women often trade sex for support, and in this context adultery is often part of a woman’s survival strategy, a method of exchanging one partner for a better one. In this way the adulteress, unlike the prostitute, does not wholly disassociate female sexuality from the domestic sphere of familial life, although in different ways both compromise the implicit hierarchy of gender. Yet while the adulteress compromises the masculinity of her husband, her actions do not undermine the system in general. On the other hand, the active sexuality of the prostitute, restrained by neither husband nor wifely role, does.

Male sexuality, associated with the public sphere of the street, is not subject to such domestication or moralization. A man asserts his masculinity not only by controlling his women, but in the number of his sexual conquests, that is, in the public manifestation of his virility and power. This virility is associated with dominance, both sexual and social, the *sine qua non* of the macho or manly man. This is evident in social slang. Alvito noted that the favored terms employed by men in Acari to describe their sexual performance were *rasgar* (rip) and *machucar* (lacerate), terms redolent of aggression and force. A macho or *homem de verdade* (real man) embodies the salient aspects of masculinity: virility, bravery, forcefulness, dominance. Particularly among working-class men who lack access

to economic or other traditional bases of male power, sexuality becomes an important field in which claims to such power are staked.²⁸

Functionally, then, male adultery “doesn’t exist.”²⁹ That is, adultery is not a locally recognized moral category by which a man’s decency is gauged, and there is no social expectation for a husband to be faithful to his wife as long as his sexual conquests do not compromise his role as household provider. This is not to say that women tacitly accept their husband’s philandering, but there is little social sanction for it, and both women and men view it as a common feature of conjugal life. For example, there is no named social category such as the cuckold for a woman whose husband has been unfaithful to her. It is only when a husband’s extramarital activity threatens his household, most especially his ability to support his children, that public opinion can be mobilized in a woman’s favor. Even in these cases I found that women often assigned the blame not to the man himself, but to his female lover. Fonseca also observed that when women recounted stories of their husband’s infidelity, invariably it was seen as the other woman’s fault. When she inquired if the husband himself was not partly responsible as well, her informants responded that the other woman “knew he was a married man and so she shouldn’t have messed with him.”³⁰ Thus even among women the social limits on female sexuality are much more stringent than those placed on male sexuality.

It is significant that while the prostitute represents the immoral pole of female sexuality in the cultural imaginary, the *viado* or *bicha*, slang terms for the passive partner in male homosexual intercourse, represents the immoral pole of male sexuality.³¹ In the urban periphery and more rural parts of Brazil sexual behavior continues to be symbolically classified, at least partly, in categories hierarchically defined by the sexual act of penetration rather than notions of a particular orientation based on one’s sexual object choice.³² Here men are expected (or imagined) to take the active role of penetration and women the passive role of being penetrated. Because male sexuality is associated with penetration, the active partner in homosexual intercourse retains his masculinity, while the *viado* is transformed and degraded, becoming through his sexual role a symbolic female. Similarly men thought to spend too much time in the domestic domain of women are likely to acquire the label.

If the *viado* exemplifies the effeminate man, then the prostitute exemplifies the phallic woman, for both figures confound the spheres of *casa* and *rua* and the behavioral and sexual norms that they represent. In a classificatory system in which moral female sexuality is defined in relation

to the domestic sphere and the roles of wife and mother, the prostitute represents a transgressive female sexuality that is associated with the public life of the street. Nonetheless given that a man's sexuality outside of the domestic sphere enhances his status as a macho, the prostitute is also a socially necessary figure, and indeed prostitution has never been criminalized in Brazil—although the prostitute herself has always been a figure of moral depravity.³³ Similarly the *viado* is a male whose behavior, sexual or social, transgresses a system in which masculinity is linked with social and sexual dominance, becoming in the process morally degraded. Here the transgressions represented by the prostitute and the *viado* mark the moral limits of the system. Yet the figures of the adulteress and the cuckold suggest that it is the perversion not so much of sexual norms but of the gender hierarchy that governs their expression that is coded as immoral within this system. At least in the public imaginary, this gender hierarchy is both sexually and spatially coded by a complex series of associations and in ways that delineate moral behavior for men and women.

THE MORAL WORKER AND THE IMMORAL BANDIT

While sexual conduct is an important criterion by which people evaluate a woman's moral reputation or decency, it is the realm of work more than sexuality that most influences a man's moral status.³⁴ Here a basic distinction is drawn between legitimate work and illegitimate work as embodied in the figures of the *trabalhador*, or honest worker, and the *bandido*, or criminal. Once again notions of *casa* and *rua* as contrasting spheres of conduct and meaning inform the moral significance assigned to these two socially constructed identities. Where the *trabalhador* dedicates himself to lawful if low-paying labor and the support of his household, activities that position him within the domesticated morality of the *casa*, the *bandido* pursues a lifestyle of conspicuous consumption financed through his illegitimate activities on the streets.³⁵

Today the figure of the *bandido* is associated principally with drug traffickers, but according to historians, Rio's *favelas* and peripheral neighborhoods traditionally were home to a small number of local *bandidos*, ranging from *malandro*-type petty thieves to *bicheiros* (those who ran the numbers game called *jogo do bicho*).³⁶ In areas characterized by the absence of an organized state presence, these men often functioned as a local version of the traditional *dono*, or big man, by, among other things, adjudicating disputes, protecting residents from outsiders, and enforcing

communal norms—tasks that some contemporary traffickers also perform. For these reasons the *bandido* was tolerated as a socially useful figure, but he held an ambiguous, and not entirely respectable, status.

Contemporary drug traffickers have been accommodated within these preexisting structures of masculinity and moral status. The culture of male street gangs that has consolidated in Rio's *favelas* and peripheral neighborhoods, like that found in urban areas throughout the United States, exemplifies an exaggerated form of patriarchal masculinity that the anthropologist Alba Zaluar termed a "virile culture."³⁷ This "extreme and exclusive" masculinity is characterized by a rigid code of honor and vengeance, the conspicuous display of prestige items, and an obsession with violence that is either actual or performed in bodily postures and clothing designed to communicate the aggressive toughness of its wearer. Not surprisingly misogyny is a prominent feature of this virile culture, and *bandidos* typically compete with one another to acquire girlfriends and sire children. Unlike the traditional patriarch, however, they frequently abdicate responsibility for maintaining these children.³⁸

In contrast to the *trabalhador*, who uses his earnings to support his household, the *bandido*'s easy cash is quickly spent in the pursuit of immediate pleasures. His consumption is, in Zaluar's words, "orgiastic": focused on clothing, jewelry, cars, women, parties, expensive alcohol, and other high-status items associated with vice and the ethos of the street.³⁹ From the perspective of the community, the *bandido*'s ephemeral and illicitly acquired gains are socially barren and produce little of enduring value. By contrast, money earned through honest labor produces greater social value because it is invested in the sphere of the *casa* and the reproduction of the family. Such *dinheiro limpo* (clean money), it is said, *dura mais* (lasts longer).⁴⁰

In situations where the economic foundations that traditionally buttressed male claims to authority and social dominance have eroded, participation in a drug gang offers otherwise disenfranchised youth opportunities to publicly assert their virility and augment their personal sense of power and access to easy cash, women, and a sense of identity that low-paying, unreliable, and often humiliating service sector employment does not.⁴¹ Members of these gangs boisterously proclaim a form of power and authority that is otherwise denied them, a seductive factor for many poor and working-class youth. But it comes at a price: residents in neighborhoods dominated by drug gangs make a clear moral distinction between the honest worker and the *bandido*. And so, even as

young men involved in the traffic wield a certain authority over the community, resolving disputes among residents and enforcing communal standards of behavior by punishing those who defy them, theirs is an authority backed by fear rather than respect. Although the *bandido* may play a role in implementing the community's moral standards, his authority rests ultimately on the force of arms.

The moral distinction between *trabalhador* and *bandido* is one that is upheld not only by community members, but by *bandidos* themselves. Gang members interviewed by Luke Dowdney and other researchers from Viva Rio drew clear boundaries between themselves and "honest" members of the community, reiterating that "*bandido é bandido, morador é morador*" (a bandit is a bandit, an [honest] resident is an [honest] resident). It's important for us to cultivate positive relations with the residents, another asserted, but "the community is the community" and should not "know about everything we do."⁴² The noninvolvement and tacit cooperation of the community are important in thwarting police raids and attempted takeovers by rival gangs, but they also protect the moral standing of honest residents from the taint of the illicit.

Unmoored from the domesticated morality of the *casa*, the hyper-masculine attributes that characterize the virile culture of street gangs are socially destructive. It should come as little surprise, then, that *bandidos* are closely associated (and associate themselves) with Exu in his guise as a dangerous and potentially malevolent spirit of the streets. The tactical utility and dramatic potential of this association were made clear to me one memorable evening on a visit to Mãe Laurinda, a *zelador* whose *terreiro* is located in a semirural district just outside the city limits. Like many areas in Rio's outlying lowlands, the neighborhood was dominated by a group of adolescent *bandidos* associated with the local drug gang who kept a close eye on the comings and goings in the area.

On that particular afternoon I had brought an American filmmaker friend with me, and after spending most of the day recording interviews with Mãe Laurinda and her husband, Seu Jorge, we were ready to return home. The couple offered to escort us to the bus stop where we could catch a ride back into the city, and twilight was settling as the four of us climbed into Seu Jorge's aging *fusca* (Volkswagen Beetle) for the short trip to the bus stop. We barely had left the *terreiro's* gated grounds for the road when the car's headlights illuminated an ominous figure blocking our passage. Looking like a menacing *exu* come to life, a young black man stood with a cigarette dangling from his lips, its smoke curling around the brim of a black hat pulled down low over his face, a pistol

held loosely at his side. Before I could fully register what was happening, the car was surrounded by six or seven youthful *bandidos* who had materialized from the shadows. All were heavily armed, the one closest to me with a handgun stuck loosely in the front of his waistband, another held almost casually at his side.

The first thought that flashed through my mind was that we were about to be robbed of the expensive video equipment that my friend had brought from the States. That thought, however, was quickly engulfed by a feeling of panic that welled up from somewhere deep in my body. Seu Jorge stopped the car and opened his window a crack. “Hey old man,” growled the teenage ringleader, embellishing every other word with an obscenity, “you know the rules. Lower your fucking headlights.” Absorbed in recounting some story to me, Seu Jorge had neglected to set his headlights on low beam, one of a series of gang-instituted rules that enabled lookouts to immediately identify strangers attempting to infiltrate their turf. There was some agitated back-and-forth as Seu Jorge, accustomed to the deference customarily due a man his age and humiliated by this insolent treatment (made all the more shameful for having been witnessed by three women), attempted to reclaim his dignity with his own forceful riposte. After several minutes of posturing by both sides Seu Jorge turned down the beam of his headlights and the *bandidos* melted back into the dark. With a lurch of the old *fusca* we were off again, Seu Jorge muttering under his breath while my friend and I collapsed into a posttraumatic puddle in the backseat.

What I initially feared was a dramatically staged robbery turned out instead to be a performance of a different kind. By not lowering his headlights, Seu Jorge had violated the rules of the street and contravened the *bandidos*’ authority, which was swiftly reasserted by a symbolic display of power accompanied by adolescent braggadocio. The verbal sparring that erupted between Seu Jorge and the *bandidos* represented a clash between two competing systems of male authority and status, the *bandido* and the *trabalhador*. Although Seu Jorge had acquiesced ultimately, it was not out of respect but fear. Indeed his angry reaction suggested just how indecent this social exchange was: not only had these young *bandidos* usurped the authority traditionally enjoyed by their elders, but in asserting this authority they also had humiliated an honest worker in front of his womenfolk and compelled his deference.

The most striking element of the confrontation to me, though, was the deliberate way that the head *bandido* had evoked Exu in his self-presentation, heightening the atmosphere of menace that pervaded the

encounter. With little more than a stance and a few props, he had conjured up a phantasm of malevolence that, like great theater, framed the incident as one of potentially cosmic significance and scale. Notwithstanding my initial fears, this performance was not some dramatic prelude to a crime, but rather part of a public staging of the gang's collective authority over the neighborhood, its unpredictable and terrifying qualities dramatically underlined by association with Exu. Manipulating the symbolism associated with the spirits of the streets, the *bandidos* reframed their power as rooted not in the human plane and its temporal arrangements, but in an occult world of powerful and dangerous spirits. These were not just adolescent males with guns, but the Devil's underlings loosed on earth. The highly ambivalent signifying power of *exu* spirits, who are at one and the same time ruthless guardian spirits and potentially malevolent forces, is an important part of their appeal in the social environment of the urban periphery.

GENDER CONFLICTS AND THE SPIRITS

I have argued that gendered norms of respectability function as constituent elements within a local moral topography that relates bodies and spaces and regulates their interactions. Ideals of propriety vary for men and women, but in both cases they are enforced by moral distinctions that specify licit and illicit activities, demarcating different gendered identities. For women, the faithful housewife and mother epitomizes the moral pole of femininity, while the *mulher da rua*, or woman of the street, embodies its immoral pole. For men, moral behavior is linked less with sexuality than with productive labor and its investment in the reproduction of the family. Here the salient dichotomy is that between the honest worker and the *bandido*. Once again the conceptual distinction between *casa* and *rua* is correlated with the moral significance assigned to these socially constructed identities; for both men and women, excessive association with the *rua* carries consequences for one's moral status. The figure of the *bandido*, like that of the prostitute, embodies the dangerous and illicit aspects of the *rua* when unconstrained by the domesticated morality of the *casa*.

Within this system of gendered identities, the demands of masculinity conflict with those of femininity at various points. In times of economic uncertainty and social change, when taken-for-granted norms of proper conduct are no longer supported by prevailing social and economic arrangements, these conflicts become particularly fraught around

issues of domestic responsibility and the sexual division of labor. For many inhabitants of Rio's urban periphery, the patriarchal ideal of the family headed by a single male wage earner remains an unreachable goal, yet its romanticized image continues to inform popular conceptions of gender roles. Lack of education, the precariousness of urban labor markets, and economic stresses mean that men, expected to be the financial providers for their dependent women and children, often cannot fulfill this role. Women, reared to be wives and mothers, find themselves caught between traditional expectations and a reality in which male support and economic supremacy are not guaranteed. Rather than a stable and protected home life, the ideology of male dominance has brought many of these women uncertainty, domestic strife, and, all too often, violence. One consequence is that intimate relationships between men and women are often troubled and emotionally unsatisfying for both partners.⁴³

Nazaré's retrospective accounts of her growing relationship with Maria Molambo and the events that led her to cultivate that spirit, which I discuss in the next few chapters, exemplifies how the figure of Pomba Gira provides an organizing framework for addressing many of these issues. In particular her narrative suggests how this entity speaks to the inherent structural contradictions of a system in which the behavioral norms that bolster men's reputations directly threaten women's reputations. In these situations Pomba Gira frequently serves as a woman's protector, invoked in the context of conjugal struggles in which the masculine codes and values of the street undermine the foundations of domesticated femininity. Whereas women like Nazaré are subject to the moral constraints of this domesticated femininity, Pomba Gira and other spirits of the street are not so constrained. Stories about these entities emphasize the interpenetration of these two worlds, juxtaposing the quotidian realities of the everyday world with the unlimited possibilities of the spirit world.

PART THREE

Discourse

Stories about Pomba Gira

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Becoming a *Zelador*

The spirits must resonate with both the psychological and the social circumstances of the possessed.

—Vincent Crapanzano, “Spirit Possession”

People do not simply act, of course; they attempt to understand and narrate themselves as actors.

—Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950*

SERVING THE SPIRITS

Although Nazaré works with a variety of spirit entities, it is the *pomba gira* Maria Molambo whom she credits most for her reputation as *zelador*, the term she uses when describing her relationship with the spirit world. *Zelador* means “caretaker” or “custodian” and typically refers to the caretaker of a building or residence. As is true for the practitioners of other Afro-diasporan religions like Santería and Vodou, Nazaré is not concerned with affirming the reality of the spirits through abstract statements of belief, but with correctly fulfilling the caretaking duties that will ensure the spirits’ beneficence in her life. Rather than believing in the spirits, she serves them, and the difference between the former, indicating cognitive assent, and the latter, denoting dynamic labor, is significant. Spirits are conceptualized as members of one’s family, and like family members, the labor required to maintain harmonious relationships with them involves activities of remembering, caring, feeding, and feting. These activities ensure the continual flow of *axé*, vital energy or life force, necessary for the well-being of both humans and spirits.

Food is both an evocative symbol of the mutual sustenance that is believed to characterize the relationship between humans and spirits

and a material means through which these ties are cultivated. Elaborate dishes of ritually prepared and consecrated foods are a key component of many interactions with the spirits, who are believed to consume their essence. These prepared foods may be left at a natural spot associated with a particular spirit, placed before an altar representing that spirit, or enjoyed by the community that periodically gathers to honor the spirits for whom these special foods are prepared. In themselves these dishes form a complex symbolic universe; their ingredients recall mythological stories and particular qualities associated with the spirit who receives them and serve to activate that spirit's energy. Through these offerings and feasts practitioners sustain the cycles of exchange between the human and spirit worlds, expanding their own *axé* and that of their community.

Maintaining harmonious relations with the spirit world involves a great deal of work: preparing and offering favorite dishes, holding annual parties, making sure altars are cleaned and infused regularly with substances that fortify the spirits to whom they are dedicated, assembling a community in which these and other ritual duties may be fulfilled, and, perhaps most important, providing the corporeal form that makes it possible for the spirits to manifest themselves in the human world. In return for her assiduous performance of these duties, Nazaré believes, the spirits look out for her welfare and that of her family. By continually serving the spirits in these ways, Nazaré is confident that she is able to draw on their powers for the benefit of others. A *zelador*, then, is a person who through his or her caretaking activities is able to mobilize the powerful forces of the spirit world in order to affect the human world.

While Nazaré claims to have been born with this ability, it is also one that she has developed in the course of addressing troubles in her own life. Like many Afro-Brazilian practitioners, she says that she became a *zelador* “*não pelo amor, mais pela dor,*” not through love but through pain. She believes that the spirits first called her to their service when she was a very young child, provoking periodic blackouts. Family members later reported that these episodes were characterized by odd or aggressive behavior and verbal outbursts of which Nazaré denied any knowledge or memory. These incidents seem to have occurred initially in the context of Nazaré's fraught relationship with her father. After her precipitous marriage at the age of fifteen, her behavioral disturbances began to be directed at her husband, Nilmar, whom she suspected of

chronic adultery. These episodes became so disruptive to the couple's home life that, in desperation, Nilmar eventually sought help in the Afro-Brazilian religion Umbanda. There Nazaré's problems were determined to be the work of a restive *pomba gira* spirit.

Umbanda practitioners believe that many problems in the human world, from physical illness to domestic discord, have a spiritual dimension and can be alleviated by identifying and establishing contact with the spirit determined to be the author of the ailment in question. Minor problems can be alleviated in ceremonies of *limpeza*, or spiritual purification, herbal baths, or offerings to the spirit. Chronic behavioral disturbances, like those Nazaré suffered, may be diagnosed as the actions of low-level spirits demanding "light." In these cases the afflicted may need to develop their skills of mediumship in order to "work" with the spirits. Some very unevolved spirits of the anonymous dead, called variously *eguns*, *quiumbas*, *obsessores*, or *almas infelizes* (unhappy souls), are ritually dispatched in various ways rather than cultivated.¹ Serious adversity may be the result of a *demanda* or *trabalho feito*, a mystical work petitioned by an enemy for this nefarious purpose. Healing in this case requires a defensive strategy, for example, fortifying one's own "spiritual protection" in order to fend off the mystical attack, or an offensive strategy, such as a counterattack.

Some perturbing spirits can be persuaded to assist human beings through a process called indoctrination or baptism.² In Umbanda spirits may evolve and eventually reach a higher spiritual plane through the performance of *cariedade* (charity), occasioned by the help they render to humans who come to consult them in Umbanda ceremonies. Through a human intermediary, who either incarnates them or translates their messages, indoctrinated spirits are thought to work on behalf of their human supplicants, recipients of the charity that will lead to the spirit's own evolution. In this way a perturbing spirit can be transformed from the source of an individual's affliction to his or her supernatural guardian and protector.³

Transformation is achieved in a process of training whereby the afflicted person learns how to manifest spirit possession within a ritual structure, mastering the codes that regulate its expression and interpretation, and thereby rendering it a meaningful experience.⁴ Without such mastery an individual's manifestations of possession are usually brute, unintelligible affairs that must be progressively shaped into a form recognizable (and acceptable) to the community. The process can be quite

complex due to the wide variety of spirit entities recognized in Umbanda, each with its own distinguishing attributes, styles of incorporating, and likes and dislikes.⁵ *Pretos velhos*, for example, typically manifest as wizened elders, displaying the weight of their years in stooped gait and frail voice, whereas *caboclos* project the proud physique of the noble warrior and *exus* are loose-limbed pranksters, with a penchant for exuberant dance and vulgar talk.

Although the entities cultivated by Umbanda practitioners are described as the spirits of people who once lived on earth, they are not the spirits of particular individuals known to their mediums in real life. Rather they are archetypal representations of street folk, Indians, African slaves, gypsies, and other socially salient character types that pertain to popular memory. Drawn from different historical and social contexts in Brazil, these characters are identifiable by their broadly stereotypical characteristics.⁶ Thus *caboclos* are modeled on the proud “noble savage” of nineteenth-century Brazilian nativist literature or the tragically romantic figure of the North American Indian more than actual indigenous Brazilians, and *pretos velhos* tend to be represented as the idealized image of the slave: domesticated, humble, and skilled in herbal healing.⁷

Likewise, markedly absent from the *povo da rua* are the limbless beggars, winos, and menacing gangs of homeless, glue-sniffing kids that inhabit the actual streets of Rio and other urban centers. With few exceptions Umbanda’s spiritual entities represent celebrated, folkloric figures, independent antiheroes who occupy a subaltern position in relationship to the ruling white elite and who embody values of courage, self-sufficiency, ingenuity, hard work, and loyalty to their communities. They are, in other words, familiar characters in a story that many Brazilians like to tell themselves about themselves. Accordingly Umbanda’s spirits are best understood not as faithful depictions of actual human beings but as products of a national mythologizing process through which certain folkloric figures are imbued with popular virtues and invested with supernatural powers.

Information about these entities circulates in various forms, from the innumerable books, tracts, and periodicals published by the different Umbanda federations, to radio and television programs hosted by Umbanda mediums and websites and chatrooms devoted to Umbanda topics. Casual conversations with family members or friends and pop culture references are other sources of knowledge. Thus even if an individual has no personal experience with Umbanda, he or she is likely

to be familiar, at least in broad terms, with members of its spiritual pantheon.

Within the general parameters that define particular spirit entities, there is considerable room for personalization and embellishment, and, depending on the medium, a particular spirit entity may be attributed with a life story full of unique detail. As time goes on, a spirit can develop his or her own reputation within the community as people share stories and memories about their interactions with that spirit, a process that deepens the sense of “personhood” attributed to it.

Individuals’ ability to skillfully express the personality of their possessing spirit by alterations in posture, voice, bearing, and gesture is honed through experience. Ritual control of possession thus is achieved by learning the intricacies of the religious system, socializing an experience that otherwise may be experienced as odd, disturbing, or frightening.⁸ In this process the individual learns not only how to manifest possession in a meaningful manner, but also how to control it—how to prevent or delay it, for example. This control is necessary for a *zelador*, who not only brokers the passage of the spirits between worlds, but must be able to communicate with the spirits at will in order to intercede on behalf of clients or divine ritual solutions to their problems.

Autobiographical accounts of the journey from affliction to ritual mastery typically fold details from the individual’s personal life into a larger narrative structured by tropes common to the genre. Although formulaic, these accounts demonstrate how women like Nazaré draw on the densely symbolic mythology of Pomba Gira to reimagine events in their lives, placing them within a larger drama of suffering, spiritual power, and transformation. In these narratives the spirits of Umbanda provide a cipher through which the past is invested with significant details and patterns, leading up to a dramatic denouement and a future of new possibilities.

When narrating her past Nazaré employed many details drawn from the semiotics of the *exu* world. The use of these details enabled her to imply, without having to say so explicitly, that it was *exu* spirits who were responsible for her erratic behavior. References to *cachaça* (sugar cane liquor), the hour of midnight, crossroads, the colors black and red, and other symbolic allusions to the world of *exu* spirits had an important metaphorical function in Nazaré’s retrospective accounts and often appeared in the corroborating stories of family members. Regardless of whether the events depicted in these narratives actually happened in the manner described, or whether they were retrospectively shaped to fit

the stereotype, the stories themselves attest to how widely shared beliefs about the spirits organize personal experience and imbue it with meaning.

What is especially clear in Nazaré's life story is the intimate connection between Pomba Gira and Nazaré's own frustrating relationships with the men in her life, first her father, whom she experienced as a remote and authoritative figure, and later her husband, whom she suspected of serial infidelity. Her account, which I obtained through a series of life history interviews, indicates how Pomba Gira can transform fragmentary episodes or dysphoric experiences into intelligible events. In the act of discerning significant patterns in past events and relationships, Nazaré consolidated her sense of herself as a *zelador* who had been "born with the gift" of spiritual power.

BORN WITH THE GIFT

Nazaré de Souza Oliveira was born on December 19, 1952, on the outskirts of the city of Rio de Janeiro to an unmarried, teenage mother and a father who never acknowledged his paternity. Like many other children born in such circumstances, Nazaré was raised by her grandparents (whom she referred to as her mother and father), immigrants from a small town in the neighboring state of Minas Gerais who had been drawn to Rio in the 1940s by the promise of steady work in the city's emerging industrial belt. Despite the more cosmopolitan setting of their adopted home, they retained many of the traditional ways of Mineiros (inhabitants of Minas Gerais), known in Brazil for their conservative family life.

In accounts of her early life Nazaré portrayed her family as conforming closely to the model of the patriarchal household described by the Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre as the foundation of Brazilian society. Like the plantation master in *Casa Grande e Senzala*, Freyre's classic account of the formation of Brazilian culture, Nazaré's father was a domineering but distant figure who demanded unquestioned obedience from his dependents and exercised firm control over the sexuality of his wife and daughters while enjoying a range of sexual partners himself.⁹ True to type, Nazaré characterized her mother as self-abnegating and subservient, the devoted mother and faithful wife who stoically bore the suffering caused by her husband's infidelities. This starkly drawn opposition between the conduct of men and women would be a recurring theme in Nazaré's descriptions of her life and in her own expectations about human behavior.

Nazaré reported that throughout childhood and early adolescence her parents closely monitored her activities; she was not allowed to socialize outside of school nor to stray far from home. Confined to the domestic sphere, she was expected to help her mother with the daily chores of cooking, cleaning, and laundering. It was assumed that upon finishing high school she would marry, taking up the traditional role of housewife and mother. Although her parents were not particularly religious—Nazaré remembers going to church infrequently—she described them as good Catholics. This was measured by her parents' outward adherence to Church teachings, especially those concerning appropriate gender roles within the family, rather than by weekly attendance at Mass.

Infractions of the paternal rule were met with physical discipline, and it is in this context that Nazaré reported one of her first memories of what she later understood as a form of spirit possession, an event that she claims took place when she was four years old. After she got into some form of mischief, her father began to beat her with a *chinelo*, an inexpensive rubber sandal of the type that Brazilians typically wear around the house. Suddenly the young child was possessed by a spirit being, an entity that Nazaré later identified as a manifestation of Pomba Gira. In Nazaré's description of this episode, the entity—in a deep voice quite unlike that of a child—commanded the beating to stop, and Nazaré's father, recognizing that something was strangely amiss, paused in his blows. In the same strange voice the entity then began recounting intimate details of her father's extramarital affairs, while Nazaré's mother listened on in shocked silence. Incorporated in the child's body the spirit then took refuge under the kitchen sink, where the family's supply of *cachaça* was stored, and finished off the contents of an entire jug.

This was not the first episode of unusual behavior that Nazaré displayed as a child, nor would it be the last. She later came to believe that these behavioral disturbances constituted proof that the spirits were calling her to their service. Her recollections of these episodes, reinforced by the testimony of her mother and other family members, were important signposts by which she organized the narrative trajectory of her life story. These stories both constituted and corroborated Nazaré's sense of herself as a religious healer who was, as she put it, "chosen by the spirits." Unlike many Afro-Brazilian cult leaders who undergo extensive rites of initiation in order to exercise religious authority, Nazaré claimed that she was "born with the gift" of working with the spirits. "Not everyone has this gift," she cautioned me. "Those who are chosen are few. Many

people pretend that they have this gift. Many deceive. But others are born with the gift and no one can take it away.”

Although Nazaré ultimately came to see her gift in beneficent terms, initially she seems to have experienced it in troubling ways: as strange outbursts, blackouts, sudden fainting spells, and other kinds of odd behavior that perplexed and frightened those around her. She reported that on several occasions her parents sought help at their local Catholic church, where she was prayed over and treated with holy water. As a result of these treatments the disruptive episodes would lessen in their frequency, although Nazaré claimed that she continued to be subject to occasional fainting spells and other disconcerting experiences.

One of the most severe came soon after her first menstruation, when Nazaré learned that her father was making arrangements for her to marry the eighteen-year-old son of an acquaintance. Recalling that time, she vividly described how an angry entity took possession of her and threatened that if the family attempted to carry out the marriage, the entity would “take [her] away.” Apparently in fulfillment of this threat, soon afterward the pubescent girl disappeared from home and was found several days later, dirty and shoeless, in a local plaza. Nazaré claimed that she had no memory of those lost days because she had been under the sway of the spirit, who had protected her from harm until she was found by a police officer and returned home. Learning of this incident, the young man’s family broke off the marriage arrangements, citing concerns about the mental stability of the bride-to-be.

In Nazaré’s retrospective accounts these and other early incidents always occurred in the context of struggles with her father, whom she experienced as a rigid and controlling figure subject to regular bouts of violence toward his wife and daughter. According to Nazaré, the spirit would possess her as her father’s hand was about to strike, goading him to beat harder or threatening him in a guttural voice that she claimed frightened him: “Molambo would arrive and say, as he was about to hit me—because my father really beat me—like this [the spirit would say] ‘Hit me! Hit me!’ and my father realized that it wasn’t me.”

While Nazaré’s relationship with her father was marked by conflicts that often ended in physical violence, her mother remained “neutral,” neither protecting her daughter nor standing up for herself. When I asked Nazaré if her episodes were ever provoked by her mother, she replied that she had never fought with her mother, only with her father. Nor did Nazaré display any overt anger toward her mother for failing to protect her. Instead she presented these childhood behavioral disturbances as proof

that the spirits had taken her into their protection. “The spirits always defended me,” she affirmed, “from my father and from anyone else who wanted to harm me.” The protective presence of the spirits and their defensive interventions in her life were recurrent, organizing motifs in Nazaré’s autobiographical narratives.

MARRIAGE AND CHILDREN

When she was fourteen Nazaré met her husband-to-be, Nilmar, at a school dance that she attended with a cousin. Soon she was skipping class in order to spend time with him outside of her parents’ watchful eye. Eventually her father discovered the relationship and, scandalized by his daughter’s impropriety, barred her from his household.¹⁰ Disowned by her father, Nazaré went to live with Nilmar’s family, and when she was fifteen and he seventeen, they were (unofficially) married.¹¹ She described this period as the first time in her life that she remembered feeling happy.

Her happiness was to be short-lived, however. Soon after she moved in with Nilmar and his family, Nazaré discovered that she was pregnant. Six months later she suffered a miscarriage. “I was just too young,” she explained, “a child myself, and I couldn’t support the baby.” Meanwhile her relationship with Nilmar soured, and she began to suspect that he was pursuing other women behind her back. Lonely and anxious to bind Nilmar to her, Nazaré became pregnant again, only to miscarry that pregnancy several months later. Finally, in 1970, she successfully gave birth to Marisa, the first of her six children, although she herself would not deliver all of them. Her fertility and desire for a large family were to be sources of ongoing discord with Nilmar, who dreamed of attending college and escaping the poverty into which they both had been born.

Less than a year after Marisa’s birth Nazaré became pregnant with a second child. Nilmar, still a teenager himself and struggling to support his new family, received the news with resentment, and after a bitter dispute the couple separated. Convinced that Nilmar had fallen under the sway of another woman, Nazaré resolved to strike out on her own. However, several months later, hugely pregnant, unable to support herself and unable to return to her father’s house, she was forced to reconcile with Nilmar. A series of separations and reconciliations followed, as well as a third, fourth, fifth, and eventually a sixth child (figure 16).

Beginning with Nazaré’s second pregnancy, Nilmar’s ambivalence—and even resentment—toward the prospect of having more children fed



FIGURE 16. Nazaré and her youngest son.

her conviction that he was cheating on her. His *traição* (treachery) and her own unhappiness were major themes in Nazaré’s description of the first years of her marriage. Because they could not afford an apartment of their own, the couple remained with Nilmar’s parents for several years, an arrangement that only heightened Nazaré’s insecurity and suspicions of household intrigue. She was certain that Nilmar brought his mistresses to the house when she was out and enlisted the help of family members—including his own mother—to hide the evidence from her.

Although the children were a source of frequent disputes with her husband, they also provided an occasion for Nazaré’s reconciliation with her father, who had severed relations since expelling her from his house. Unable to resist baby Marisa, whom Nazaré had brought with her on a clandestine visit to her mother, her father was finally persuaded to resume relations with his daughter. However, neither the birth of Marisa nor a second and third child deterred the intermittent episodes of what Nilmar described as Nazaré’s “strange behavior,” which he found alternately baffling and enraging.

On one memorable occasion, Nazaré confided, she had spent the day in her usual way, cleaning the house and preparing dinner, settling the older children down to study before their father got home from work and putting the youngest to bed for a nap. Suddenly she was possessed by an angry entity who began to destroy the apartment, knocking over the lamps and throwing the pots of food around the room. Just as suddenly as it had come the entity departed, and Nilmar arrived to a scene of domestic chaos and a wife who claimed to have no idea how this state of affairs had come about. In a separate interview with me Nilmar confirmed his wife's account, confessing that at the time he thought that his wife was deliberately provoking him.

Another time Nazaré was possessed by a spirit who turned on the gas for the stove and burned through an entire canister of fuel, enough for a month's worth of cooking. A party at her children's school became a neighborhood drama when Nazaré sat on the floor in the middle of the room screaming and stuffing her face with the candy meant for the children. At a loss, the school called Nilmar, who took her home and put her to bed, her face and hands smeared with melted sweets.

A TURNING POINT

Nilmar described other peculiarities on the part of his wife: "At times, I would come home after work to change clothes and take a shower, and I would come out from the shower and she would say, 'Oh, you're home?' And I would say, 'Yes, I am home, I walked past you earlier, I talked to you in the kitchen, don't you remember?' And she would say, 'I didn't see you come in. I talked to you?' And I would say, 'How could you not see me, I spoke with you right there!'

"Sometimes at night she would get up, eleven o'clock at night, she would get up, open the door and go to the corner, dressed in pajamas. And I would call to her, 'What is going on with you?' And she wouldn't respond, she would just stand there at the crossroads for hours. I thought that the woman must be crazy. At first, I thought it was a joke, but soon I began to find it very strange. I didn't know if the woman was crazy or what. I didn't know anything. And she began to do other things. She would pick up a knife and threaten me with it, wanting to cut me. And afterward she would say that she didn't remember any of it. I thought it was very strange. Afterward she would say, 'I did this?' And I would say, 'Yes, of course you did this.' I thought it was a joke on me, her way of testing me—all of a sudden she would go out into the street and I wouldn't

know where she went. I thought it was something to irritate me, to provoke me so that I would leave her. I thought this.”

Nilmar continued, “Finally, I began to put things together, and I resolved to straighten out my life.” He confided in an older friend, “a man of sixty years old, an experienced man,” telling him about the strange behavior of his wife. This man observed that the symptoms Nilmar described suggested that his wife’s problem was not mental, but spiritual, and he advised Nilmar to seek a spiritual healer. “I told him that I had never had any dealings with this kind of thing,” Nilmar replied, “and I didn’t know how to go about helping my wife.” So, with the help of this friend, Nilmar located an Umbanda center and explained his domestic problems to the leader, who immediately asked if he could bring his wife in. Nilmar replied that he would bring her, but if she knew the reason why, she wouldn’t come because she thought such things were disreputable, so he would have to tell her something else.¹²

Inventing an excuse, Nilmar put Nazaré in the car and told her that they were going to the house of one of his colleagues from work. When they arrived at the door Nazaré, realizing that he had brought her to an Afro-Brazilian religious center, refused to enter. He told her that his friend lived above the center. As Nilmar described the subsequent events to me, when the leader came out to talk to them, Nazaré became possessed by an angry entity: “All of a sudden. And she didn’t want to go inside the center, and this entity that was incorporated in her was cackling horribly and saying that Nazaré was hers: ‘She is mine, I am going to take her to the cemetery, I am going to take her to the sarcophagus, to the sepulcher, she is mine!’ She was laughing and gnashing her teeth and we were trying to get her to go inside, but she wouldn’t, she had a force inside of her and she wouldn’t budge. But finally we succeeded in getting her inside, and she was cursing me and glaring at me and it wasn’t her in there. And I became terrified at that, by that thing that had dominated her.”

“We got her in the center,” he continued, “and she sat there in the middle of the floor, on the ground. And this is something that I knew if I told anyone outside, they would never believe me, but she broke all the bottles in the place, as she was passing by, they just exploded. She never touched them, but they exploded. And then she sat there, in the middle of the center on the ground, and began to light cigarette after cigarette and to eat them—lit cigarettes. She ate them one after another, and at the time she didn’t smoke. She grabbed a bottle of *cachaça* and drank the whole thing down. And the leader said to me, ‘Look, we have to do a *trabalho* [ritual

work], she has to develop this spirit. You will need to buy the things for this *trabalho*.' He told us the day that the ceremony would be held, and we bought the things required and we went. And so we began there, in this way. And only later I began to find out that the crazy things that she was doing were the result of these entities."

From Nazaré's point of view, these events marked the beginning of a long struggle. She described this period in her life in the following way: "I would do these absurd things without realizing it and without having any memory of it. I wasn't conscious of it, but I also didn't want to believe it. Because from the beginning, I don't remember burning all the cooking gas. I don't remember all the dirty pans in the middle of the floor. I don't remember that one moment my house was neat and tidy and the next I myself, unconscious, threw everything on the floor just when my husband was about to arrive home from work. When he got home, he almost had to kick a pan out of the way to step through the door, it was such a mess. I don't remember any of this.

"When my husband took me to the center, when I became aware of those spirit manifestations, that *bruxaria* [witchcraft] from nothing, and everything breaking without me moving a finger, I fought against it. I didn't like it. At first, Nilmar thought that I was playing a game, that I was crazy, and he told some of his friends that he was going to hospitalize me. So, the *pomba gira* took me out of the house, just when he wanted to take me to the doctor. He went crazy looking for me, and when he found me, he took me to the center and I fought it because I didn't want anything to do with *macumba*,¹³ I didn't like to even pass by the door of a center. I was afraid of it. My parents were Catholics, I was raised a Catholic." Nazaré's mother eventually admitted to Nilmar that her daughter had been plagued by similar episodes since early childhood, a fact that they had avoided telling him for fear that he would abandon her. As he recalled, "Probably I would have, you know? Shit, she was smoking cigars [a favorite of *exu* spirits] at five or six years old."

With time, however, the thought that Nazaré had suffered these afflictions since early childhood—that she was a person "made in the spirit" since birth—became something of a comfort to him. Yet when he initially brought Nazaré to that first Umbanda center, he admitted, he hadn't realized that he was setting her on a lifelong path that would dramatically transform their relationship: "I did everything, everything, to try to save [the marriage]. Because in my head, by treating this, my life would continue as normal. I never imagined that she would get deeper and deeper into it until . . ." He broke off as Nazaré interrupted him, protesting

that she had had no choice in the matter, that her spirits had led her to this end.

LEARNING TO USE THE GIFT: BECOMING A *ZELADOR*

In Umbanda Nazaré began the long process of learning the personalities, proclivities, and desires of the spirit entities that the center's leader diagnosed as the root of her behavioral disturbances. She described the initial experience as watching another force take over her body, having a greater will displace her own: "When it was time for me to see, I saw what was happening and I couldn't do anything. It was like, I am going to take up that *adjá* [the ritual rattle attributed with the power to call the spirits down to the human world and to send them away], and I don't want to take up that *adjá*, but I take it up. A greater force than my hand picks it up and shakes it. I myself didn't want to do it, but I was doing it. But I was fighting against it too. I heard from my own mouth—but it wasn't me talking—that what they [the spirit entities] wanted was *luz* [light]."

These experiences were so disturbing that Nazaré feared for her sanity at times. Significantly, she linked these thoughts to deep feelings of ambivalence about her role as a housewife and mother: "Many times I thought Nilmar was right, that I was crazy. Because many times I would look at my children, and in spite of being the supermother that I always was, at times I didn't want children around me. So I thought that maybe I was disturbed in the head. That was when I decided to talk to them [the spirits], since there was already something wrong inside me. I wanted to know what they wanted from me. If they wanted something from me, they would have to change my attitude toward them. And they did. It took time, but they did. That was when I began to frequent Umbanda."

As she became more familiar with the Afro-Brazilian spirit world, Nazaré became less afraid: "The spirits would come and many times they would let me see [i.e., she would be conscious of the possession]." As an example, she explained that she doesn't drink *cachaça*, the preferred beverage of *exu* spirits, and in fact can't stomach it. But during the possessions she would watch as her own hand picked up a bottle of *cachaça* and emptied its contents into her mouth: "In only one gulp, I would drink an entire bottle, as if I was drinking water. I ate lit candles, lit cigarettes. I didn't have the will to control my body." When I asked her what this experience felt like, she replied that it began with a sensation of heat or cold that entered her body and left her without the ca-

capacity to control her limbs: “It was as if I was looking, seeing, feeling, but I didn’t have control. It was at that point that I began to believe that I wasn’t crazy, that there was something else taking control of my body.”

Nazaré spent the next several years frequenting Umbanda and learning how to ritually receive Maria Molambo and other spirit entities under the supervision of the cult leader, a process sometimes referred to as *desenvolvimento* (development). In this training process, whose specifics vary from group to group, the afflicted learns to recognize and produce the highly valorized experience of possession: its corporeal language and consensually accepted meanings, the subtle differences that distinguish different categories of spirits, the musical and rhythmic patterns believed to summon these spirits, and countless other practical minutiae. In the course of these sessions, called *giras de desenvolvimento*, the spirit itself is said to become *doutrinado* (indoctrinated); that is, its behavior is socialized to accord with community expectations and standards.¹⁴

When the leader of the center Nazaré frequented began to introduce Candomblé spirits and practices, a phenomenon not uncommon in Brazil,¹⁵ she began to cultivate the *orixá* spirits as well as her Umbanda entities, eventually going through the initiation process that consecrated her as a daughter of Oyá, one of the three wives of the thunder god Xangô.¹⁶ In time she started her own center, in the basement of her childhood home, which had been left to her upon her father’s death.

In Nazaré’s description it was not she herself but Maria Molambo who first began to give consultations to clients: “Molambo opened a little room for me to give consultations. She didn’t ask me at all. When I saw what was going on, I asked, ‘What is this?’ It wasn’t my doing. Molambo demanded it. It was she who started it. And before I knew it, she and her clients opened a center. And then my spirits began demanding more and more, and the house started getting full.”

Strange as this scenario might sound to outsiders, it is a common one among practitioners of Afro-Brazilian traditions, particularly outside of the strictures of the more traditional forms of Candomblé. Among heterodox practitioners it is not unusual for a particular incarnation of a spirit entity to gain a local reputation for being especially powerful or effective, apart from the reputation of the human being in whose body it ostensibly manifests. Of course this is encouraged by the stories of problems resolved or blessings received through the agency of the spirit by the person who incarnates it. In an environment in which the forces of misfortune, envy, and malevolence tend to be personified and are believed to prevail over an individual’s life circumstances, claims about

the efficacy of a particular spirit entity may quickly attract a circle of supplicants. It is a short step from there to claim, as Nazaré did, that it is the spirit itself who has attracted a clientele. Because the initial steps to the resolution of problems within Afro-Brazilian religious circles is ever greater involvement in the religious life, the presence of a sufficient clientele in practice necessitates a center in which they can pursue and develop their relations with the spirit world. Thus with clientele, a center is born.

Because she had spent significant time in an Umbanda community whose leader later introduced Candomblé entities and practices, Nazaré's own religious life combined elements from these two traditions. Her bimonthly *toques*, rituals in which the spirits are summoned with drumming, dancing, and song, typically commenced with ritual salutations to the *orixás*, who would arrive in the bodies of those members who had been consecrated to them, spend some time dancing, and then be ritually dispatched. Following a short break in which the spectators who had gathered for the ceremony refreshed themselves at the tiny bar across the street, a red light would be turned on, ushering in that part of the evening devoted to the *exu* spirits.¹⁷

The high point of these ceremonies was the arrival of one or another of Nazaré's main *pomba gira* spirits, Maria Molambo or Maria Padilha. Much beloved by the community, these entities are central figures in Nazaré's spiritual work. Some of their most dramatic appearances, however, have occurred outside of the ritual sphere and in the mundane context of everyday life. Indeed most of Nazaré's stories about these spirits and their activities centered not on her spiritual work, but on her tumultuous marriage to Nilmar.

MISTRESSES, WIVES, AND CHILDREN

Together for almost forty years, Nazaré and Nilmar have a relationship whose longevity has been undercut by infidelities and periods of separation. Despite the trials of their married life (or perhaps because of them), in 2000 Nazaré described her affiliation with Nilmar as more like "brother and sister" than husband and wife. Although this genial state of affairs may be true today, it is the fruit of many years of strife and anguish suffered on both sides, as well as of economic necessity. In many ways it is also the fruit of Nazaré's long years of religious training, for without her relationships with the spirits and the structure that this provides, it is uncertain if her marriage would have survived the turbulence of the past two decades.

In Nazaré's recollections Nilmar, from the early years of their marriage, was a womanizer whose constant infidelities both humiliated her and threatened her household. In those early years, well before Nazaré began frequenting Umbanda, she maintained that Nilmar's extramarital affairs were so time-consuming that he had little time for her, and she bore their first two children alone in the hospital. According to Nazaré there were constant telephone calls to their house from women during this early period. To illustrate how depraved the situation became, she asserted that even Nilmar's mother had conspired in her son's dalliances, helping him hide lingerie and other telltale signs of his trysting.

When I asked her why she hadn't left him, she replied, "For where? At that time my father didn't want me, I couldn't go back home. Where was I going to go?" She then related the story of the first time she left Nilmar, although not of her own volition. This separation lasted some nine months. Marisa was still a toddler, and Nazaré had just discovered that she was pregnant again with their second child. She informed Nilmar that she was pregnant, and he told her to take her things and leave his house. "And I said to him, 'The child is yours. It's not only mine.' He replied, 'I know that the child is mine. But since you went and did it [got pregnant] without my consent, I don't want you in my house.'"

Nazaré went to live in a small shack on a piece of land owned by her father: "There was an empty house there and I went to live there alone. I went hungry there, with Marisa and a pregnant belly. I went hungry. I hid my belly and I managed to get a job. There they didn't know that I was pregnant, I passed all the tests. I worked as a clerk at an optical shop. That shop still exists today. And that was how I managed to take care of my child, with my neighbors watching her while I worked, feeding her because Nilmar didn't send even a carton of milk for her, he never sent anything."¹⁸ About a week before she gave birth, several days before Christmas, Nilmar appeared at her door. Nazaré recalled Nilmar saying on that occasion, "I came to fetch you to go spend Christmas at home, and you are obligated because you have our daughter, Marisa, and Mother wants to spend Christmas with Marisa." So, very close to giving birth to their second child, Nazaré went with him: "I thought, I'll go because at least I'll have some help there. My parents were very old and I couldn't put all this burden on them. Because my father had told me that he wasn't obligated to support me anymore. My father was very stern."

Nazaré accompanied Nilmar back to his house, where several days later her labor pains began: "Nilmar was with a woman and my mother-in-law took me to the hospital." Two days after the birth of this second

child, whom she named Pedro, Nazaré was released from the hospital, but the baby remained there and she returned to her mother-in-law's house alone. She recalled that the following morning, as she was getting ready to go back to the hospital to see the baby, a woman arrived at the door inquiring after Nilmar, who was taking a shower. "What is your name? What do you want?" Nazaré asked her. The woman replied that she and Nilmar had made a date to go to the beach and that she had been waiting for him for over half an hour in a taxi down the street. Upon hearing this, Nazaré was possessed by the entity that she would later identify as Maria Molambo: "[Molambo] kicked in the door of the bathroom, broke the door. She cut my toe and blood spurted everywhere. And she said to him, 'Go!' because the woman was waiting for him. He went crazy. Crazy." The woman ran away. And as quickly as it had come, the entity then left her. Nazaré went to the hospital to see her baby, wondering why her foot hurt but too disoriented to ask.

Having barely managed to support one child on her own, Nazaré could not manage two children, and so despite Nilmar's infidelities she reconciled with him. Soon enough she was pregnant again with their third child, Ana Paula. According to Nazaré, it was during her third pregnancy that Nilmar seemed to settle down and began to show himself to be a "good father": "He wasn't a good father of the type to take me to the hospital to have a baby. He didn't like small children. He only began to pay attention once they were a year old or so. He has never taken any of his children to see a football game. But we never lacked food. After Pedro was born, he didn't send me away again. And then I got pregnant with Ana Paula, and he stayed on, because I think that he felt remorse about the other two for whom he never did anything. But we never lacked anything. Everything that I needed he gave to me." Although Nilmar showed little interest in the births or rearing of their children, the fact that he provided for his family's basic needs made him a good father in his wife's eyes. Indeed, as Nazaré observed, compared to many other men in the neighborhood, Nilmar had never drunk or gambled away his paycheck; unlike the families of these men, Nilmar's family had "never lacked anything."

Despite being a good head of the household in the sense of materially providing for his wife and children, as a husband Nilmar had one grave shortcoming in Nazaré's eyes: his appetite for women. "His only defect is women. Nothing else," she told me. "He was a good head of the family, that is, his children never lacked anything, I never lacked anything. But

women were his downfall.” Many of Nazaré’s early episodes of strange behavior occurred in connection with her suspicions that Nilmar was with another woman. According to Nazaré, it was Molambo who always revealed Nilmar’s secret philandering, and it was Molambo who would, in due time, wreak vengeance.

MAKING SENSE: THE CONSTRAINTS OF WOMANHOOD

Loquacious by nature, Nazaré appears to have rebelled from an early age against the strictures of proper womanhood imposed by her upbringing, represented most forcefully in her mind by the figure of her father. The crowded, urban environment in which she came of age brought her into daily contact with all manner of temptation that militated against her fully internalizing the norms of submissive domesticity: popular music extolling contradictory ideals, school dances full of potential *namorados* (boyfriends), friends who introduced her to cigarettes and other forbidden vices. Caught between a conservative home life and the changing world around her, the young Nazaré was attracted to activities that brought her into direct conflict with her father. As she recalled it, terrible arguments were a constant feature of her home life: “There were always fights, aggressive fights between us. It was like this: he thought that I had to do what I was supposed to do—stay at home, wash the dishes, help my mother, and this kind of thing—and I only wanted to do what I wanted to do. I wanted to go out, see my friends, but I couldn’t. Neither could anyone visit me. Not once did any one of my friends enter the courtyard.” She reported that often these fights were followed by beatings, and it was in the course of one of these beatings that she recalled her earliest possession episode, at age four.

Nazaré’s accounts of her childhood emphasized the clash between a lively young girl desirous of the typical experiences of adolescence and an autocratic father who, in enforcing his conservative standards of family life, quashed, at times physically, these innocent desires. This structural conflict, given dramatic expression as the familiar struggle between a daughter and her father, between what was presented as a set of defensible, adolescent desires and a rigid set of rules and expectations, ran throughout many of Nazaré’s recollections.

Within the framework of these narrative reflections it was generally just such a conflict that precipitated a possession event, permitting, if not the actual resolution to the conflict, the intervention of the spirits

in Nazaré's "protection" or "defense." In all of Nazaré's stories of such spirit interventions prior to her marriage it was the figure of her father—authoritative, patriarchal, conservative—who loomed central in the precipitating conflict, whether attempting to marry her off against her will or confining her to domestic drudgery.

As an example of her father's traditional views of women, she recalled how she came to be called Nazaré, rather than Maria, her given name: "My family was very strict, traditional Mineiros, as I have said. So much so that while I was still a virgin, my name was Maria. Everyone called me Maria, only Maria. Maria this and Maria that." That is, until her romance with Nilmar was discovered. "When I lost my virginity, as a teenager, my family began to call me Nazaré. And so I asked my father, 'Father, why is it that you are calling me Nazaré now?'" Her father's response was terse and to the point: "Because you are no longer pure." The name Maria, steeped in Catholic allusions to virginal purity, was no longer appropriate, having been sullied by his daughter's premarital affair. She was from that point on to be called only by her middle name, Nazaré.

This anecdote dramatically highlights a recurring theme in Nazaré's life story as she related it to me: the forceful imposition of traditional norms of feminine conduct, represented and enacted by a male authority figure, that functioned to restrict her activities, circumscribe her movements, limit her future, and define her in ever more restrictive ways. In this world there were two mutually opposing categories for women: pure and impure, chaste and dissolute. And as the story of Nazaré's name makes poignantly clear, a woman is either one or the other; she can never be both.

From the very beginning Nazaré's teenage dalliance encountered her father's stern disapproval. He forbade her to see Nilmar, who, being from an impoverished family, he considered an inappropriate match for his daughter: "We had been seeing each other secretly for about eight months and my father caught us. He grabbed [Nilmar] and he grabbed me and he said that if [Nilmar] didn't marry me he could get out, and then he threw him out. And I had to go live with Nilmar's family. My father disowned me and we got married without really wanting to."

Once out from under her father's thumb, Nazaré was happy, if only for a time. As she would discover, in many ways she had exchanged one set of strictures for another: those defining the traditional Brazilian daughter for those defining the traditional Brazilian housewife, or *dona-de-casa*. Like most men of his class and generation, Nilmar expected that he, as

head of the household, would provide the material support while Nazaré rendered domestic service and cared for his needs and those of his children. This attitude is still prevalent, particularly in lower-income areas like Acari. As Nazaré's son-in-law explained to me, "My thinking is this: if I am working, [my wife] should stay at home. I think that if I can support her, her and the children, provide everything for her, then I think that she should stay at home and not work."

Soon after moving in with Nilmar and his family, a series of pregnancies coupled with her husband's insistence on her wifely role confined Nazaré once again to the domestic sphere. With small children to care for, she could not finish school. She blamed her husband for this, saying that he refused to take care of the children while she studied at night. Nor, she claimed, would he permit her to work outside of the house.¹⁹ When I asked her why, she replied simply: jealousy. "All my life with him, he thought that—men looked at me a lot because I was very pretty—so he thought that men would see me and their passions would be aroused,²⁰ you understand? I think that he thought I was a slut. Because I was pretty, he thought I was a vulgar woman."

In recollections like this one Nazaré emphasized her husband's sexual jealousy, a theme that emerged in many discussions of her relationship with him, and one that sheds some light on the friction that marked their relationship. Certain that her husband was being unfaithful to her, she simultaneously suspected him of thinking her a "vulgar woman" or a "slut" because her beauty attracted male attention. The logic of her reply to my query was that if she were to work outside the home, she would not only be transgressing her proper sphere, but would be exposed to other men, whose passions would be dangerously aroused, leading to adultery.

Following social convention it is the unfaithful woman who is characterized as "vulgar" or a "slut"; a man's infidelity is never described in terms that impugn his moral character. Implicitly opposed to the slut, the proper wife is the woman who preserves her chastity by restricting her activities to the domestic duties of raising children and keeping house. A woman who does not conform to these expectations opens herself to accusations of sexualized transgression such as Nazaré attributed to Nilmar.

In this respect it is significant that Nazaré once described the difference between Maria Molambo and herself in the following terms: "Molambo is a woman of the street: a prostitute, doing good and bad. Nazaré is the opposite of her: she is calm, only does good, is a mother, and a faithful wife." Then she added, "Molambo always says she herself is a whore,

but her *menina* [i.e., Nazaré] is not.” Returning to this theme on another occasion, she reiterated, “Nazaré and Molambo are opposites. Because Molambo, as I have told you, has always been a woman of the street, a woman of many men, a prostitute—everything like that, the cabaret, and so on. And Nazaré has never done anything. What have I done? I have never frequented those dances, clubs, street life. Nothing, I have never done anything. My husband can run around with other women, but his wife cannot.”

Embedded in this testimony are a series of dichotomies, coded in spatial, temporal, and sexual terms: house and street, day and night, wife and whore. To underscore her moral status as a virtuous housewife, Nazaré invoked the traditional dialectic of *casa* and *rua*, with their associated standards for female sexuality. Maria Molambo represents the illicit sexuality of the street, a world of cabarets, nightlife, and multiple men; her antithesis is the faithful wife, associated with the licit sexuality of the domestic sphere. Thus although Nazaré’s husband can “run around,” she herself cannot.

Indeed Nazaré claimed that it was only after her marriage that she discovered the identity of the spirit entity whom she came to believe had been plaguing her: “Before I married Nilmar, the entity was called Pomba Gira Menina [Pomba Gira Maiden]. Only after the marriage did she use the name Maria Molambo, because Molambo is a heavy name for a little girl.” In Brazilian Portuguese the term *menina* is used largely in reference to young girls, and although one may jokingly refer to a grown woman as *menina*, it retains its connection with the sexual innocence of childhood. Marriage and the initiation into proper female sexuality that it represents make it possible for Nazaré to incorporate the *pomba gira* Maria Molambo, the spirit of a prostitute. Before this event she claims to have been possessed by a de-sexualized *pomba gira*, Pomba Gira Menina.

However, lest Maria Molambo’s moral status contaminate her own, Nazaré was at pains to demonstrate that she conformed perfectly to the wifely ideal, that she was indeed “the opposite of Maria Molambo.” In stories about her life she portrayed herself as a devoted mother and faithful spouse, insisting against my persistent queries that she had never cheated on Nilmar, despite his frequent affairs, and that the welfare of her children was always her highest concern. She referred to herself as a “supermother” more than once, and indeed she nearly always had one child or another peeking between her legs, sitting on her lap, or otherwise vying for her attention. “I was raised in a very traditional way,” she

explained, “and I learned that when you pick a man and marry him, you have to have children. And my children required a lot.”

Soon after her first pregnancy ended in miscarriage, Nazaré began to suspect Nilmar of seeing other women while she remained home. She blamed his womanizing for the fact that he had not participated in the births of either of their first two children. As she put it, “I would go to the hospital alone to have the baby because he was never around. My husband never went to the hospital to see the children. Only this last [of the three oldest], Ana Paula. It was only my mother-in-law who would go.” When I asked her where he was, she replied, “Motels,” a reference to the many love motels that dot the outskirts of Rio.

By the time their third child was born Nilmar seemed to have reconciled himself to family life: “After Ana Paula was born, there were no more separations like that [when Pedro was conceived]. Every child inspired a war. But after Ana Paula, we began to settle down at home with our three children. And he began to show himself a good father. . . . After that he didn’t abandon me anymore.” But despite the fact that Nilmar did not abandon her again, Nazaré continued to be convinced that he was cheating on her. “Every Carnival he disappeared for the week,” she declared.²¹ “Women came to the house looking for him. There were many telephone calls to my house, many women.”

Marisa recalled the tumult of her parents’ relationship as she was growing up: “Ever since I can remember my mother has always suffered. Because now I am a woman and I have my own family, I understand this. I understand this kind of suffering. When a person is betrayed, whatever the betrayal, it brings suffering. It is difficult.” She paused briefly before continuing. “I saw my mother in the morning serving breakfast to my father, then ironing his clothes, cleaning the house, washing and drying and styling her hair, getting ready for his return, and he would arrive home in the evening with lipstick traces. I saw them. I would see these things. I am the oldest child, so I witnessed many things. And it is very sad.” I asked Marisa what, if anything, she had learned from her parents’ relationship, and she replied that it had shown her many things in her life, principally “not to trust, not to give yourself completely in a relationship, or you will wind up getting burned.” Marisa had had this lesson reconfirmed in her own life, when she was abandoned by her common-law husband for a troubled acquaintance to whom the couple had opened their house.

Perhaps because her own marriage was a source of uncertainty and betrayal, Nazaré invested herself in her children and, as they grew older

and had children themselves, in her grandchildren. “I think what brings happiness to her today is her grandchildren,” Marisa observed. “It is the children in whom she has, let us say, made her world, her children and grandchildren.” Reflecting for a moment, she added, “It is a way . . . let me put it like this: you know those clowns that are always smiling, smiling, smiling? If you look into the life of a clown, he is very sad. But what does he try to do? Make others smile so that they become happy. So this is what happened.”

With this analogy Marisa described something that I too had begun to perceive as I spent more time with Nazaré: beneath her boisterousness and predilection for ribaldry, there was a deep sadness. At times this sadness became despondency, and our interviews would devolve into laments against the suffering that she had endured: the treacheries that had been inflicted upon her by ungrateful *filhos-de-santo*, the deceptions of her husband, the abuses of clients who, once they had achieved their goals, abandoned her. Yet even when she was not depressed, these complaints often served to initiate conversation or to fill gaps in its flow, and so I had not given them much weight, dismissing them as formulaic strategies for cultivating my sympathy and inculcating a sense of obligation. I later came to understand that this discourse of treachery, deceit, and suffering, although undoubtedly fortifying social ties by encouraging feelings of guilt and sympathy in listeners, also constitutes a significant organizing motif in that set of spiritual practices connected to Pomba Gira and stigmatized as *macumba*.

Spiritual Defenders and Protectors

It is believed that Pombagira is endowed with very rich real-life experience that the majority of mortals never know, and for this reason her advice and assistance come from someone who is, above all, capable of comprehending the desires, fantasies, anguish and despair of others.

—Reginaldo Prandi, *Herdeiras do axé*

I take care of them [the spirits], and in return they take care of me.

—Nazaré

SPIRITUAL DEFENDERS AND PROTECTORS

In marked contrast to Nazaré's stories of human treachery, when she spoke of her various spirits it was always in positive terms as her protectors and spiritual guides. In these narratives the spirits invariably protected Nazaré from those who threatened to harm her or her children, particularly Maria Molambo, who played the role of Nazaré's most important and stalwart safeguard. "Molambo defended me," Nazaré affirmed, "she never left me. She defended me from anyone who wanted to hurt me." According to Nazaré, the most acute threat to her well-being came not from an external enemy, but from within her own family: her father and, later, her husband, the very men whose social roles identified them as protectors of women and children. Unlike the ideologically defined image of the benevolent patriarch, these figures appeared in Nazaré's stories as sources of bitter conflicts or humiliating betrayals

that precipitated Maria Molambo's interventions. "First it was my father," explained Nazaré, "but it passed to Nilmar."

Despite the fact that Molambo, like all *pomba giras*, is depicted in song and imagery as the antithesis of maternal femininity, Nazaré often described her as a mother: "Molambo acted like a mother to me. Molambo was my mother." This was in contrast to her real mother, who did not (or could not) protect Nazaré: "[Molambo] always protected me. She never, ever left me. She always took care of me." When I asked her why Molambo had chosen her, Nazaré replied, "She says that she never liked children, but she thought that she was something like a mother to me. Because of the power that I had, at four years of age, to incorporate this entity."

Significant in this claim is the paradoxical conjunction of power and powerlessness: an otherwise powerless child, subject to the absolute authority of the paterfamilias, becomes the channel for a greater power by incorporating Maria Molambo. Some scholars have concluded that this dynamic of power and powerlessness, as determined by stratifications of gender, class, age, or other socially salient hierarchy, is one reason that religions incorporating spirit possession are often found among socially disadvantaged groups.¹ Indeed much of the drama conveyed in Nazaré's retrospective accounts centered on the contrast between the superior potency of the spirits and her own childlike helplessness or ignorance. Narratively structured around this organizing motif, stories featuring Maria Molambo portrayed the spirit as an agent of transformation whose mystical activities in Nazaré's defense recontextualized past events and catalyzed important realignments in her emotional life.

A favorite theme was Molambo's access to clandestine knowledge. Explicitly described in story and song as inhabiting *as trevas* (the shadows), a netherworld in which all that is ignoble in terrestrial life prevails, this entity is especially attuned to the hidden dimensions of human affairs, the shadowy world of secret intimacies and covert agendas. Thus in Nazaré's description of her very first possession episode, the entity who later would be known to her as Maria Molambo recounted details of her father's extramarital escapades before her shocked mother, revealing things that "only an entity or spirit could know."

In similar recollections from her later life Nazaré described Molambo as having knowledge of things that she herself could not—or did not want to—know. "Molambo gave me a lot of proof," she affirmed. "Beyond the help she gave to others, she gave me proof. I discovered many things that

were wrong in my house through Molambo, many things that were wrong happening in front of my nose and Molambo alerted me, woke me up.” In response to my quizzical look she continued, “You see, my husband was always that husband *mulherengo* [skirt chaser], as they say. So it would happen like this: he would go out with a woman from the neighborhood and I would wake up suddenly and see it all before my eyes. This has happened several times. If he gave a woman a present, I would know about it. He would say to me, ‘But how do you know this?’ Because she [Molambo] told me, ‘You are being deceived.’” When I asked how Molambo actually communicated these things to her, Nazaré replied, “She comes in my dreams, she comes as an *encosta* [partial possession], she whispers in my ear, many things.”

The central protagonist in all of Nazaré’s stories about Nilmar’s betrayals was Maria Molambo, who alone exposed his clandestine activities. As Nazaré put it, “It was always Molambo who discovered the mystery.” For Nazaré, Molambo’s protection and defense against Nilmar were constituted in terms of these “discoveries.” I analyze a particularly dramatic example of this in the next chapter, but for now let me note that this characteristic ménage à trois of male villain, female victim, and spirit protector is an important feature of women’s relationships with Pomba Gira.

Remarking on this, the anthropologist Stefania Capone argued that Pomba Gira “becomes the pivot for a profound reorganization of the power relations within a couple,” enabling women to act in the face of the treachery or violence of the men in their lives.² Yet although this reorganization of power relations was evident in Nazaré’s narratives, it was rather more ambiguous in real life. Rather than leave her husband definitively, as the avenging logic of Pomba Gira would suggest, Nazaré, for economic as well as emotional reasons, preferred to “appease both sides,” as she put it.

APPEASING BOTH SIDES

Although it was Nilmar himself who initially had sought help for Nazaré in Umbanda, he complained bitterly that it had not provided the cure that he desired, namely, a docile and obedient wife. As time went on and Nazaré’s participation in Umbanda increased, so did Nilmar’s resentment—and his resistance. Feeling that his wife was no longer his own, that, as he put it, “She is not married to me” but to the spirits,

Nilmar began to insist that she limit her involvement. Nazaré explained, “There was a time when he didn’t want anything more to do with Macumba. If I didn’t have to go [to a ceremony], he insisted that I stay at home, and I said ‘Okay, fine. I won’t go.’ And then my life became hell. The most incredible things in the world happened. You understand? So [Nilmar] said, ‘There is no other way, it’s you who know your life,’ and so I went back. Without his validation, without him saying okay. But he helped me. He didn’t accept it, but he helped me. And from then on things got better. But only after [many years].”

This anecdote illustrates an ongoing antagonism that has marked Nazaré’s life with Nilmar. In it she portrays the consequences of Nilmar’s resistance to her spiritual development in vivid terms: life “became hell,” the “most incredible things in the world happened,” that is, she was subject to disruptive and uncontrollable possession events. As a result of these “hellish” and “incredible things” (which were never specified further) Nilmar was persuaded to grant his implicit permission for Nazaré to continue.

Given the discord between Nazaré and Nilmar, it is surprising that she described the effects of the spirits in her life as helping her to become *equilibrada*, or balanced. This is a term often employed by practitioners to indicate a state of calm equanimity derived from their feeling of being spiritually fortified.³ As Nazaré put it, “I take care of them [the spirits], and in return they take care of me.” At least part of her feeling of equilibrium derived from the protection that the spirits, especially Maria Molambo, guaranteed her against Nilmar himself. And so her husband’s complaints were never enough to make Nazaré totally cease her spiritual practice.

She told me, “If I had to choose, him or me, I don’t have a choice, because as soon as I choose him, I am going to lose him and my life. I am very aware of what’s going on, because I have been in this for many years, many years indeed.” Alluding here to Nilmar’s infidelities, Nazaré maintained that if she chose to devote herself to him rather than her work as a *zelador*, she would end up losing him, and therefore her own life, to his extramarital affairs. It is the spirits who have made her “very aware” of Nilmar’s clandestine philandering. She explained, “I am forty-eight years old and I already have twenty years in the saint.⁴ I believe this: he asks me to choose, but if you demand that I choose him or me, if I pick Nazaré I have already lost. If you pick one over the other you have already lost. You are going to have to choose what? It is better to *amenizar* [appease] both sides.”

She elaborated on this point at some length, insisting not only that her and her children's equilibrium depended on serving the spirits, but that the consequences of not doing so would be dire: "I don't have free choice, I don't have it. I don't have my own life. And [Nilmar] knows that I don't have my own life. If I say to you 'Oh, I'm not going to work today because I don't feel like working for the spirits,' they remind me. I am a slave. I don't have the capacity to choose. If I want my family, even if unbalanced, at least healthy, I have to know how to do things right. Because if not, I will suffer the consequences."

COBRANÇA AND SOFRIMENTO: THE BURDENS OF WORKING WITH THE SPIRITS

When I asked Nazaré what these consequences entailed, she replied, "[The spirits] *me cobram* [charge or remind me]. If I don't work [with them], if I don't care for them, they castigate me. Bad things start to happen. But if I take care of them, I know I am protected and my family is protected. Something bad could still happen, but not as bad." That the spirits "charge," that they remind their *serviteurs* of their obligations and even exact retribution when they are not properly cared for is a fundamental notion. It points to the reciprocal nature of the relationship between humans and spirits: to secure spiritual protection and the equilibrium that goes with it, a *zelador* has to "know how to do things right"; that is, she has to know how to serve the spirits in the proper ritual fashion, making regular offerings, celebrating their feast days, observing the taboos specific to each, and ritually incarnating them in regular ceremonies. If this spiritual work is not performed correctly, the consequences are "bad things": misfortune, ill health, and adversities of various kinds.

Having established the primacy of her spiritual work, Nazaré returned to the subject of her husband's objections: "Nilmar always wants to come first. And he never will. So he thinks that our life is like this: me, the children, Macumba, now the grandchildren, and lastly him. It doesn't work this way. Everyone has their place. Of course my children and my grandchildren are first. I divided it up wrong before. But before my children and grandchildren are my spirits. And without them, I wouldn't have the strength to help my children."

As this enumeration indicates, service to the spirits is construed as necessary for the well-being of the *zelador* and her or his family. Because of her obligations to the spirits, Nazaré can draw on them to help her own children, much as one would rely on godparents or well-connected

members of one's extended family. "Molambo gives me a lot of force for survival, she helps me a lot," Nazaré confided on another occasion. "When I am sad, I sense her presence. When I am not achieving things, rarely I don't achieve them, she does everything to make sure they happen."

Despite the benefits of her close ties to the spirit world, Nazaré characterized the relationship as a burden: "I think that it is a *sofrimento* [suffering]. For me, it was a *sofrimento*. My whole life, I struggled a lot with it, there were many battles. I didn't want Macumba, I didn't like Macumba, I was afraid of Macumba. There were so many things since I was four years old that I lived through, you see? So for me it was a *sofrimento*. Up to today, I don't have my own life." Indeed Nazaré often stressed the difficulties that such a life necessitated and her initial unwillingness to undertake it.⁵

In comparison to some Candomblé participants, who tend to emphasize the joy they feel in serving the spirits and who often are born into a Candomblé community or choose to enter into one, practitioners of Umbanda and other Afro-Brazilian traditions frequently describe themselves as "chosen by the spirits" against their own will or desires.⁶ According to the conventions of these groups, the state of being chosen is manifested in dramatic or persistent episodes of illness and suffering. Typically it is only after several such episodes and the intervention of a third party that the afflicted recognize the spiritual origin of their affliction. Even then, they may resist such a diagnosis and the lifestyle change that it represents. Eventually, however, the afflictions increase in intensity until they can no longer be ignored, and at that point the afflicted have no choice but to recognize the spiritual demands that they represent. This, in brief, is the trajectory apparent in Nazaré's narratives. In characterizing her relations with the spirits as a *sofrimento*, Nazaré placed these experiences within the conventional framework of Umbanda discourse, imbuing her economic difficulties and episodes of domestic strife with spiritual meaning.

Being unfamiliar with these discursive conventions at the time, I was surprised by her characterization of her spiritual calling as a suffering, and in response asked if she had had a choice in the matter, would she have chosen to work with the spirits. "I would continue," she replied, "because I love my spirits. But I think that I suffer a lot, and they say that I suffer a lot not because of them but because I am very *boba* [naïve]. They say that the synonym of *boa* [good] for me is *boba*, because I don't act with reason, I act with my heart. If you come to me, even if I don't have anything myself, if you come to me needing something, I won't deny you anything.

I will even go beyond, and the next day you will see that I am worse off than today because I shouldn't have done that, but I did it to help you and I wound up hurting myself. Do you understand? This is my big problem.”

With this qualification Nazaré suggested that it was not so much the demands of the spirits themselves, although this had caused her grief in the beginning, but the ability, even the obligation to help others as a *zelador* that produced suffering. Because she acted “with [her] heart” rather than her head, others had opportunities to exploit her benevolence. I myself had seen this happen on several occasions, when Nazaré performed a *trabalho* for someone on credit, never to see him or her again.

She returned to this troubling aspect of her gift in another conversation, explaining it in this way: “I am dominated. They [the spirits] don't let me choose. When I think, okay, I'm going to take a break [from helping people], here comes someone very ill, *caída* [broken], and I look at them and put my nose in it. And there goes my rest, it all starts again. The center starts filling up again. That is, I fight and they [the spirits] push. They try to help me, but there is that detail, my goodness is what hurts me. It's my goodness that hurts me. It's like this: this is not a business, but there are expenses, electricity, water, you have expenses. So it's like this, I have to charge a price [for spiritual services], at least for me to purchase the candles, this and that for the *barracão*. And many times I don't charge, and then it is easy for people to say ‘Oh, I'll pay you next month,’ and then they don't come back because they already got what they wanted, This is what hurts me because I used up the little I had. I can't—there is a rule, the client gives me what he wants—but I can't do it totally for free. I can charge less, like I already do charge less than everyone else, but I end up paying for it when I can't cover my own expenses.”

Lamenting the self-interest of others while stressing one's own beneficence is a rhetorical strategy often employed by *zeladores*, and while it serves to cultivate sympathy in the listener, it also reflects the very real challenges that spirit healers face. While a main goal of working with the spirits is resolving people's problems, *zeladores* are not motivated purely by altruism. Rather they expect to be recompensed for their spiritual services, either monetarily or with other kinds of gifts. Ideally the relationship between a *zelador* and her client is based on reciprocity: in return for a spiritual service, the client gives “what he wants.” But for a variety of reasons, reciprocity may not be realized in practice. Here Nazaré emphasized how her desire to help others often hurt her when it exceeded

the recipient's ability (or desire) to reciprocate. Notable is the distinction that she drew between the spirits, who refer to her as *boba*, or stupid, and her own goodness, which enabled others to take advantage of her.

This implicit standard of reciprocity ensures that mutual accusations of exploitation are a common feature of interactions between *zelador* and client. The crux of the matter is not only the indeterminacy of the terms of exchange, but the indeterminate nature of the transaction itself: an exchange of material goods for nonmaterial services whose nature, value, and even existence are open to interpretation. This structure of double indeterminacy makes the *zelador*-client relationship inherently unstable, and the strategic manipulation of these indeterminacies is critical for a *zelador*'s ability to earn a living from her spiritual work.

The strains of constantly helping others, and thus exposing herself to exploitation, occasionally proved too much to bear, and Nazaré considered curtailing her spiritual work. After the departure of her affluent client, Seu Zé, which I discuss in chapter 9, she was particularly vocal on this point: "Because there are only deceptions, as you have seen. And when the time comes that you need help, there is no one to help you. I am not going to abandon my spirits, but I am going to reduce. I am going to reduce [the number of] *toques*, I am going to reduce many things." But she was careful to point out that this did not mean that she would ignore her obligations to her own spirits: "I am going to continue to care for my spirits, yes. But I am also going to be more selective [about the people she chooses to help]. Either things will get better, or they will get worse."

The thought of curtailing her spiritual work prompted another story, this one about the time she closed her center altogether. After an exceptionally ugly separation from Nilmar, Nazaré moved herself and her five children to the neighboring state of Espírito Santo, closing the door on her center and her spirits. There she rented a small trailer and settled with her brood near a stretch of sandy beach. To earn a living she and the older children worked as ambulatory vendors, selling hot dogs, packaged snacks, and soft drinks to sunbathers, eventually expanding operations to include evening events in town. For a time things went well. But soon Nazaré's forsaken spirits made their displeasure known. She recalled this period in her life: "I closed my *terreiro* once because I didn't feel like going on with all of the deceptions that happened like this, and I thought, 'Ah, I am going to stop with all of this, it is too much, I don't need this.' I closed my center and I left town. And then I had to pay the *cobrança* [price]."⁷ This time the spirits exacted their punishment for

her abandonment not on Nazaré herself, but on her youngest daughter, Graziela: “But it wasn’t me, it was my children. She [Graziela] started having headaches, she started having aches, intestinal problems, she almost died.”

With her daughter seriously ill, Nazaré returned to Rio and reopened her *terreiro*, calling upon her spirits to heal Graziela. Through the therapeutic process of initiation, Graziela eventually recovered: “So I sequestered her [in initiation], and after I put her inside the *roncô* [the area of the *barracão* reserved for those who have been initiated, containing the altars of the patron *orixá* spirits of the center] she didn’t have any more problems. So she is initiated, because she entered the *roncô* and did all of the [ritual] works of the *Iaô* (initiate; literally, bride or wife of the *orixás*), she came out as an *Iaô* and all. And from that time on, I promised that never more, whatever happened, would I stop working [for the spirits].”

According to practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions, spirits often make their presence or displeasure known to an individual by afflicting close family members, particularly those seen as vulnerable or *desequilibrado* (spiritually unbalanced or unprotected). This can manifest as physical illness, as in Graziela’s case, or as other disruptions in the web of intimate relationships that surround the individual and, in an important sense, contribute to her sense of herself as a person. Personhood here is conceived as relational: one might be an individual, but it is the dense interconnections of relationships with significant others with whom one is in constant interaction that give people a sense of identity. One is never merely a unique self in isolation but a mother, sister, daughter, grandparent, or child. This expanded sense of the self means that the illness or misfortune of others with whom one is emotionally enmeshed can serve as a diagnostic tool for one’s own relations with the spirit world. Significantly these ties are strongest between a mother and her children, and so the spirits may afflict a woman’s child to attract her attention or, as happened to Nazaré, to exact a *cobrança*.

Nazaré often returned to the story of her travails in Espírito Santo. On another occasion, after recapitulating the basic narrative outlined above, she added the detail that even though she had closed her center and fled to another state, her spirits, particularly Maria Molambo, had not forsaken her: “But Molambo did not abandon me. And when she saw that I was embittered by problems, she would come to my aid. She wouldn’t possess me like she does today, but she would *encostar*

[a partial possession during which the person remains conscious].” In this narrative retelling, despite the fact that Nazaré had fled to another state to start a new life, in the process closing the door on her center and her spirit work, Maria Molambo had not deserted her. From this point on, Nazaré was convinced that she could never renounce the call of the spirits altogether, for the spiritual consequences of abandoning them would be far worse than the human treachery to which she was exposed in serving them.

NILMAR GONÇALVES DOS SANTOS OLIVEIRA

Not surprisingly Nilmar had his own interpretation of many of the events that Nazaré related to me. I spoke with him at length about Nazaré and the effects that her relationship with the spirits had had on their life together. All of these conversations took place in Nazaré’s presence, and their occasional disagreements illustrated points of contention between them that are important for this account.

Our discussions started with the affair that led to their hasty marriage at the tender ages of seventeen and fifteen. In its basic outline Nilmar’s account closely mirrored the one that Nazaré had told me, although he had not been present on that occasion. Like Nazaré, Nilmar emphasized her father’s resistance to their association: “Her father couldn’t believe it. Her father was a snob, and he thought that I was a hippie. I played in a band, you see. He thought that I would be, I don’t know, a bum. He thought that I wasn’t good enough for her. But he didn’t know anything about my private life, he didn’t know that I studied, he didn’t know that I was interested in things, he only knew the outside, the side he was seeing. When I met [Nazaré], she and her family lived here and I lived on the other side [of the *favela*], far on the other side, so anything that he could hear about me, living where he lived, he could only know certain things. People don’t know what I am like inside. This is what I am trying to say: deep, deep down, only you know yourself. Her father caught us by surprise, and she had to come and live with my family. And then she got pregnant, but she lost the baby.”

As Nilmar recalled, it was after they had moved in together that Nazaré began to exhibit strange behavior: “It was like this: at home, I even commented on this with a colleague at work, something strange was happening with her. She was capable of lighting the stove and burning through all the gas, and later she would say that she didn’t know what had happened or what she was doing. She would do these crazy things.

In the middle of the night she would get out of bed and go to the crossroads, eleven o'clock at night, she would open the door and go out, dressed in pajamas. It would have been annoying for any man, no? And I would be calling after her, 'What is going on with you?' And she wouldn't answer, she would just stand there at the crossroads. I thought, 'This woman must be crazy.' At first I thought it was a joke, but very quickly I began to think it strange. I didn't know if she was crazy or what. I didn't know anything."

These strange and recurring incidents caused Nilmar considerable distress. Initially he assumed that she was deliberately provoking him in order to get him to leave her: "I thought it was a joke on me, all of a sudden she would leave, go out on the street—to visit or something—and I wouldn't know where she had gone. She would always leave the house all of a sudden for I don't know where. I thought it was her cynicism. Something to irritate me so that I would leave her. . . . It went on for many years, this kind of thing. Many, many years. Until I was able to figure some things out and to try and resolve my life." This was when Nilmar first brought Nazaré to the Umbanda center. That event marked the beginning of her spiritual development, an endeavor that was to profoundly alter both of their lives, albeit in different ways.

Although initially relieved that Nazaré's religious pursuits had alleviated many of the perturbing incidents that had plagued their married life, Nilmar soon began to resent her dedication to the spirits at what he saw as his expense: "I did everything, but everything to try to help her. I thought that by treating this [problem], my life would return to normal. I never imagined that she would go deeper and deeper until this point [of becoming a *zelador*]." In these and other complaints Nilmar's objections centered on the fact that Nazaré's religious duties and dedication to helping others interfered with their home life and her role as his wife. This is a conflict of long-standing duration that emerged as a regular theme in my interviews with Nazaré and Nilmar, both together and separately. As Nilmar put it, "This situation of hers, this side of her—I say to her that she isn't married to me. She is married to the spirits."

Later in our conversation he spoke about this issue at more length: "She gives a lot of herself, she is very devoted, to the point of harming her personal life, and I simply don't understand because I will even say to her, 'I think that I don't have any importance for you,' because her dedication to these people is so great that—I say this to her, I have always said this to her—her order of importance is this: she herself, her children, her religion, and I am last, you see? So I am not so important."

Frequently Nilmar's complaints were phrased in terms of Nazaré's irregular schedule and frequent absences, reflective of her various religious duties: "At any hour, midnight, one in the morning, I am waiting for her, nine in the morning and she arrives from I don't know where. . . . There were many times that she was gone for four days, a week at a time. I worked from Monday to Friday. I would get home and then Saturday she stayed there [at the center], no problem. She insisted on it. And so I spent the weekend alone in the house, and then Monday would come and I had barely seen or spoken to her. Very sad, you know. So for me it was like the end of the world."

At other times these complaints were expressed in terms of the havoc wreaked on his domestic life by Nazaré's clients: "They aggravate me, they interfere with my life and my relationship with her." The most recent example of this was Seu Zé, who infuriated Nilmar with his incessant phone calls to Nazaré in the middle of the night and her willingness to indulge his demands for her assistance or presence. Nilmar recalled this trying time: "Ahh, I didn't sleep anymore, he called for her all the time, saying that there was this problem and that problem, and she would counsel him. She would take the telephone into the living room and I was in the bedroom trying to sleep. I can't sleep with someone calling all the time, you know, it irritates me. I like to sleep well. And every hour, shit, every hour, calling and calling. At times I thought that she was completely at his beck and call."

At other times Nilmar emphasized Nazaré's dedication to others, which he saw as harming not only their married life, but Nazaré herself: "I have seen people exploit her various times already. They seek her out when they need her, they enter [the center] and stay there, and she is there the whole time, helping, helping, helping. All the time." Yet even his concern that Nazaré's religious work exposed her to exploitation was quickly subsumed by the effect that her work had on him: "Morning, afternoon, night, interfering with my life. I don't have my own life, it [Macumba] is in my house, it is all around me. Irritating me. And afterward, when these people get what they want, they disappear, they vanish. I am tired because I simply don't understand why she devotes herself so much to these people who exploit her. It always happens. I never accepted it."

These thoughts put Nilmar in a pensive mood, and he began to reflect on the life he had not lived but of which he had always dreamed, now displaced to a state of suspended fantasy: "I think the problem is that we had many children rapidly, one after the other. It was always

something with which I did not agree, I thought it was ridiculous. . . . Every year she was pregnant, she was always threatening to leave and go live with her mother. It was always like that. I thought it was crazy. You know why? Because I thought that if this kept up, I would never achieve anything in my life. I wanted to study: books, university. I wanted to have a personal life. I worked every day all day long and studied at night. I would get home around midnight, one o'clock in the morning. This business of having kids pissed me off. Even more because we were so young. And I had many dreams: I wanted to study, I wanted to take courses to enter the university. I wasn't living in my own house, I didn't have my own house, and I wanted my own house. So this business of having children, children, and more children, one after the other, pissed me off."

As Nilmar's and Nazaré's narratives make clear, a major source of conflict in their early marital relationship was their young children. For Nilmar, the early and repeated pregnancies ensured that he would never succeed in advancing in life, a pressing concern for someone born into a poor family. For Nazaré, motherhood was an essential and unquestioned requirement of being a wife. Faced with her husband's reluctance to have children, she hid her pregnancies from him: "I knew that I was pregnant and I would wait until it was too late to abort to tell Nilmar. And he never understood. I was four or five months along before he discovered it. . . . What he never wanted was to share me with children. Even today it is the same." At this, Nilmar interjected his own assertion: "Every year she was pregnant. It was always like that. I thought it was crazy. I had to pay the rent, and with all those kids—there were kids on all sides of me, everywhere I turned—so for me it was difficult." He then added, "This business of the center, of religion, also got in my way because I saw that I wasn't that important to her."

As this suggests, Nazaré's determination to have children and her involvement with the spirits were major sources of dissatisfaction for Nilmar. The former deprived him of the chance to advance himself, and the latter interfered with his domestic life, particularly his relationship with his wife. As he explained it to me, "I didn't have the life I wanted for me, you know? I would make social plans and then I would have to go by myself since she couldn't go because of her Macumba. Sometimes I would insist and insist: 'Come on, there's a party today, let's go to the party.' And to please me, she would go. And when we were there she would be incorporated [possessed by a spirit] there at the party and I would have to put her in the car and take her home. All of a sudden, she

would become possessed, *dava gargalhadas* [would start cackling], and everyone would look at me, and there I would be totally embarrassed, not knowing what to say, you know? And I had to bring her back to the center. I don't know why this would happen, although I know it is complicated." At this point Nazaré broke in to say, "They [the spirits] took over my life."

Ignoring this interruption, Nilmar continued: "I never accepted it, but then . . . She knows what we have together. We live together, but we lead our separate lives. Today if I could do anything in my entire life, I would go away." When I asked where he would go, he answered, "Anywhere." After pausing for a moment, he continued: "I think that life for me could have been better than this. I think that this is very little for me. For her, okay, her life is great, she has time to go out, and I have nothing to do with it."

With this statement Nilmar summarized a sentiment that had run submerged throughout much of our discussion: that Nazaré's spiritual life had benefited her at his expense. Because of the spirits he is "not so important to her"; she has "time to go out," and he has "nothing to do with it"; her life "is great," while his life is "very little." From Nilmar's point of view, the initial benefits of Nazaré's involvement with the spirits soon were outweighed by the demands that it made on their relationship. Put simply, Nazaré's role as a *zelador* interfered with her role as his wife. The normative hierarchy within the family had been inverted, and now he came last instead of first.

Over long years of struggle the compromise that Nazaré and Nilmar eventually reached is one in which they "live together" but lead "separate lives." Or, as Nazaré put it, they are more like "brother and sister" than husband and wife. That is to say, the reciprocal relationship characteristic of brother and sister, a relationship of horizontal ties, has replaced that of husband and wife, a relationship based on a hierarchy of authority and separate spheres and duties. Nazaré's growing relationship with the spirits played a fundamental part in this transformation. But where Nilmar's social role and responsibilities as a husband had not been affected by this transformation, Nazaré struggled with the competing demands of being a *zelador* and a wife.

NA AND NI

Nilmar was not able to achieve his dreams, either of studying at the university or of owning his own home. When I met Nazaré, she and

Nilmar were renting a small two-bedroom apartment in a low-income district just outside of Rio. Their double bed took up most of the first bedroom, with room enough left over for a large armoire that held their clothing, and the four children who were living with them shared the second bedroom. A small kitchen, one bathroom, and a tiny living room completed the apartment. As if the space weren't crowded enough, Marisa was also living there temporarily since being abandoned by her common-law husband several weeks before my arrival. She spent the bulk of her time helping Nazaré with various duties, spending the night wherever Nazaré happened to be: on the couch at the apartment, or in a small back room at the *terreiro*.

The income from Nazaré's work as a *zelador*, supplemented by the odd jobs that Nilmar could find, paid for their expenses. Since losing his job at the bank where he had worked for nearly two decades, Nilmar had been unable to find steady work, and at the time that I met them, it had been eight years since he was regularly employed. They had had to sell off many of their possessions, including their car, to make ends meet. Although Nazaré was able to earn money as a religious healer, this income was sporadic, marked by highs and lows depending on her clientele.

Upon the death of her grandfather some thirty years previously, Nazaré had inherited the house where she had been raised. She and Nilmar had lived there for part of their married life, but after their eldest children started their own families they had moved to the smaller apartment where they resided when I first met them. Their former home now housed Nazaré's *terreiro*, which occupied the basement and the back half of the first floor. The front half of the first floor consisted of a small apartment where their eldest son, his wife, and their two small children resided. A second-floor apartment had been occupied by Marisa and her husband, but was now being used by Nazaré's second daughter and her small family. Jutting out from the second floor, a third-floor apartment was in the early stages of construction. Her eldest son had begun the construction, but only the floor and some walls had been finished when he lost his job installing window blinds. In 2006, when I returned to Brazil for several months, this apartment was completed, and he and his family had taken up residence there, leaving the first-floor apartment to Nazaré and Nilmar and their four remaining children.

Nilmar spent his days doing odd jobs and roaming the neighborhood. The work he managed to find was sporadic and menial, a disquieting state of affairs for a man who had endeavored to better himself.

By dint of hard work and effort he had risen through the ranks from office boy to an administrative position at a large multinational bank. When the bank ceased operations in Brazil, he had been unable to find comparable employment. Marisa explained her father's frustrated ambitions in the following way: "He always studied a lot. He went to college. He worked during the day and studied at night. Classes and classes. He took classes in English, in French, he took classes in many things. So he thinks that today he should be doing well, him as well as his children. Only . . . things change. People change, the world changes."

The loss of his job at the bank was a devastating blow to Nilmar, according to both Marisa and Nazaré. As Marisa put it, "It is very hard because he only knows how to do that one thing. He worked many, many years. He started as an office boy, and even before that he was doing something there, I don't know if he was a janitor, but he did something there, and then he became office boy, and then he kept rising, studying more and getting promoted. It [the loss of his job] was the end of the world for him because he always dedicated himself a lot."

As I discuss in the next chapter, Nazaré herself was convinced that Nilmar's misfortune was Maria Molambo's doing. Indeed his material fortunes had indisputably reversed. Now, instead of being the head of the household, he found himself living in his wife's house with few prospects of steady employment. It was a situation that rankled him. When I asked him if he thought Molambo had had a hand in this, he replied, "This I don't know how to explain to you. She [Nazaré] says it. And since then, I have nothing." Although Nilmar himself was equivocal about Molambo's involvement in his own downturn, neither confirming nor denying it, other family members were persuaded that she was the cause. As Marisa affirmed when I put the question to her, "I think Molambo had something to do with it, yes. Maybe she didn't do the whole thing, but she gave that little push for sure."

By the end of 2001 Nilmar was not the only family member down on his luck. Nazaré too was experiencing great difficulties. She had not yet recovered from the loss of Seu Zé and several *filhos-de-santo* the previous year, and with Christmas on the horizon the end of the Afro-Brazilian ritual year was fast approaching. Because the three months between Christmas and the pre-Lenten festival of Carnival is a time of great revelry in Brazil, most people have little time, money, or energy left over for other pursuits. Accordingly, from Christmas until Easter most Afro-Brazilian religious centers close their doors, and Nazaré's center was no different. Although the final religious event of the year, Maria

Molambo's annual *feira*, drew a large crowd, the close of the ritual year was a somber one as Nazaré vowed to reduce her efforts on others' behalf and to sort out her personal life.

When I next returned to Brazil she had made good on her promise to reduce her religious work, although this seemed to be less from conviction than from want of clients. She and Nilmar had rejoined their forces, at least economically, and opened a small *birosca* (kiosk), where they sold drinks, snacks, and household basics to the passersby that steadily streamed past on their way to and from the metro station nearby. Significantly they called their latest business endeavor Na and Ni. It seemed as if Nazaré the *zelador* had been supplanted, at least temporarily, by Nazaré the wife.

Maria Molambo's Revenge

With Pombagira war is war, defend yourself as you can.

—Reginaldo Prandi, *Herdeiras do axé*

I, Maria Molambo, am a double-edged sword. I work for good and ill. If you deserve it, I will fuck up your life. If you don't, I cannot affect you.

—Maria Molambo (as embodied by Nazaré)

VICTIMS, VILLAINS, AND SPIRIT VICTORS

In Nazaré's retrospective accounts of her spiritual development it is clear that her relationship with the spirits, in particular Maria Molambo, offered a kind of protection against Nilmar's treachery. Although Nazaré understood this protection in mystical terms, we may also discern in her appeals to Maria Molambo a process whereby Nazaré narratively restructured and ultimately redefined her relationship with Nilmar. Paradoxically by invoking the spirit of a prostitute in the context of her struggles with Nilmar, Nazaré reinforced her claims as a wife. Far from resolving her troubles with him, however, working with the spirits also exacerbated the tensions in their domestic life.

As an example of the former, consider the following story that Nazaré shared with me one afternoon. Titling it "Molambo and the Maid," I recount it below as she told it to me, adding explanatory material where needed to clarify important elements of context but reserving my analysis for the sections that follow.

Molambo and the Maid

When her household budget permitted, Nazaré employed an *empregada*, a maid, who came in once or twice a week to cook and clean while Nazaré kept an eye on the children. Because it was considered dangerous for a woman to travel alone at night in the *favela*, on those days that the maid came she usually stayed the night, leaving for home at daybreak. Although unusual by American standards, this arrangement is common in Brazil, where only the poorest families do not employ hired help in their home and most dwellings include a separate service entrance and maid's quarters as a standard feature of the floor plan.

Perhaps more uncommon was the ardor with which this particular maid performed her household duties. According to Nazaré, one evening before she retired for the night, the maid, who had been in her employ for only a short time, brought her a bedtime cup of coffee, as was her nightly custom. Before she could even taste the coffee, Molambo possessed Nazaré violently and without warning. In the process the coffee spilled onto the carpet, but it left barely a trace. Molambo then departed as suddenly as she had come. "Molambo wanted to see what was going on," Nazaré reported. "And she, at the hour when I had my coffee, my Molambo came and threw the coffee—all of it—on the carpet. No one saw what had happened."

Disoriented, Nazaré kept quiet and went to bed without drinking the coffee. Near dawn, lying awake, she saw the maid creep into her bedroom and have intercourse with Nilmar. "That night I saw it all," confirmed Nazaré. "I saw her entering into my bedroom at dawn. I saw it all. The maid and my husband. It was sad, my child." She went on to explain that the maid had been slipping a sedative into her nightly coffee in order to ensure that she slept soundly. Once she was asleep, the maid would sneak into the bedroom and have sex with Nilmar as Nazaré lay unconscious beside them. How long this had gone on Nazaré could not say, although it was long enough that "Molambo wanted to see what was going on." Upon discovering this treachery, Nazaré promptly fired the maid.

But the affair between the maid and Nilmar continued: "I kicked her out, and then she became his lover outside the house. This went on unbeknownst to me for a while, and then Molambo sent me another warning. That time I gathered all [Nilmar's] things together and threw them out. I threw everything out and ordered him out as well and he went." Disillusioned with Nilmar, Nazaré eventually took a lover of her

own and followed him to the neighboring state of Espírito Santo, bringing her children with her. Although her relationship with this man was short-lived, Nazaré and the children remained in Espírito Santo for nearly two years, until Graziela's illness prompted their return to Rio. Nazaré ended up reconciling once again with Nilmar.

With its emphasis on Molambo's secret knowledge, "Molambo and the Maid" is a paradigmatic example of *pomba gira* discourse: it is Molambo who discovers Nilmar's surreptitious activities and informs Nazaré, either orchestrating events so that Nazaré is forced to confront the situation directly, or by leaving her a "warning," that is, imparting some communication to a trusted intermediary to be relayed to Nazaré. Once apprised of the situation, Nazaré is empowered to act; she fires the maid in the first instance and in the second orders Nilmar out of the house and takes a lover of her own. The situation is vividly underscored in the narrative's climactic scene when Nilmar and the maid have sex as Nazaré lies sleeping in the very same bed. This potent imagery presents Nazaré as figuratively and literally unconscious: only Molambo's intercession awakens her to Nilmar's covert philandering and enables her to respond.

In the story's denouement, related below, Nazaré describes the events that led to the reconstitution of her household, an account in which the agency of Maria Molambo once again is central. Attention to the narrative's structure and details suggests how discourse about Pomba Gira can function in situations of domestic discord, in which the gendered structure of behavior and expectations limits how a woman may respond to threats to her household while retaining her moral reputation as a wife and mother.

Like nearly all of Nazaré's stories, this one unfolded in short segments over the course of a long afternoon, sandwiched between telephone calls, fussing children, cigarettes, and coffee breaks. As she talked, Nazaré's fingers, sheathed in the remains of garishly painted fake nails, punctuated points of particular importance. Several days later, in the context of an unrelated conversation, she picked up the threads of the story again, adding new details and developing the basic plot line. This is the version of the story, which I have titled "Maria Molambo's Final Vengeance," that she told me that first afternoon.¹

Maria Molambo's Final Vengeance: The First Narration

One balmy evening Nazaré was sitting with some friends and family members drinking a nonalcoholic beverage,² and suddenly she became

very drunk. This unexpected inebriation was quickly followed by a throaty *gargalhada*, the unmistakable sign of Maria Molambo's presence. According to Nazaré—who, following convention, claimed to be unaware of what transpired during the possession episode and was only later informed of the events that had taken place—Molambo wasted no time in declaring to those present that *aquela moça* (that girl) had died, meaning Nilmar's mistress, their former maid. This surprising announcement was corroborated later by Nazaré's own *comadre* (literally, co-mother, a term of fictive kinship for a trusted female relative or colleague), who telephoned from Rio to inform Nazaré of the demise of her rival. This revelation prompted Nazaré to return with her children to Rio. Eventually she was residing once again with Nilmar, who, having lost his mistress and thus his residence, had returned to take his place in his former household.

This highly condensed, and seemingly preposterous, story was followed a few days later by a more amplified version, but it is worth noting the structure of the compressed narrative before moving on to its more fully developed form. Those familiar with the spirit world would have perceived from the first sentence the involvement of *exus*: sudden drunkenness is one of the commonly invoked signifiers of their presence. Yet for experienced adherents like Nazaré, spontaneous possession is rare, having been brought under the person's control during years of extended initiation. Thus when it does occur it signals that something serious is afoot in the spirit world. No matter how serious, however, the consequences of mystical activities must be confirmed in the human world; thus the *comadre*'s important role in confirming the mistress's actual death. In this case Molambo's spontaneous appearance signaled that this was not an ordinary death, else she would not have bothered to come unbidden. That it was Nazaré's *comadre* who called to confirm the death underscores its alleged facticity: a *comadre* is a trusted intimate whose allegiance is not in question.

The sequence of events is also important. In Nazaré's first narration the corroborating telephone call occurs unexpectedly soon after she has arrived home and before she has been fully apprised of Molambo's sudden appearance. In this first narrative sequence, then, Nazaré at the moment of the telephone call is unaware of Molambo's earlier message and learns of the death of her husband's mistress only by the phone call itself, which was thereafter confirmed by her daughter's recounting of Molambo's earlier arrival. There is thus a double distancing: first Molambo appears unsolicited to announce the death of Nazaré's rival, then

the announcement is verified by a telephone call that occurs before Nazaré has been informed of this visit.

In this framing of the events Nazaré's lack of knowledge of (or involvement in) the death of her husband's mistress is underscored by a circuitous displacement: from the narrative's perspective, it is the possessing entity who first conveys the knowledge of the death, subsequently confirmed by the telephone call. Yet from the perspective of the narrator, Nazaré, it is the telephone call that first conveys the news, which is later validated by the spirit's announcement. From both perspectives Nazaré herself is removed from any knowledge of the events, which in her retelling she is made aware of only from the mouths of others, both spirit and human. Although it is the telephone call that functions as the story's corroborating linchpin, it is the presence of the spirit that signals that something much more than an ordinary death, however much desired, is afoot.

Maria Molambo's Final Vengeance: The Second Narration

The second version of the story picked up where the first version left off, when Nazaré learned through the grapevine that some time prior to her death, the mistress had been seen purchasing a goat and other items, a sure sign that she had been orchestrating a *demanda*, a mystical attack intended, presumably, to result in Nazaré's death. However, Nazaré was careful to explain, this *demanda* was deflected by the superior power of Maria Molambo and, reversing upon itself, had killed the woman herself.

Having established this point, Nazaré elaborated on the basic narrative sequence she had outlined in her first account. The mistress, whom Nazaré more than once described as young and pretty, had died around midnight on a Friday. That same evening, also at about midnight, Nazaré herself had experienced a great thirst and began drinking a nonalcoholic beverage, finishing six glasses of it and subsequently becoming quite drunk—without having had any alcohol. Alarmed, Nazaré's daughter, who had been part of the group talking and drinking together, convinced Nazaré to return home with her. On their way back home, while passing a crossroads, Nazaré was possessed by Maria Molambo, who signaled her presence by a *gargalhada* and announced that the mistress had died. When she and her daughter arrived at home, the telephone rang, and Nazaré, still under the influence of Molambo, answered it. It was Nazaré's *comadre* calling to report the death. It took Nazaré several minutes to comprehend

what was going on. After she hung up the phone, her daughter informed her of Molambo's earlier visit.

Even more astonishing—here Nazaré raised an eyebrow at the thought—a short time later her husband was laid off from his job at the bank. With no money, no lover, and nowhere else to go, he went back to Nazaré. And, from that day on, Nazaré announced, they had lived strictly as “brother and sister.” In her final narrative flourish Nazaré stated that she had taken Nilmar back only because he had nowhere else to go, and as the mother of his children she could not ignore his pleas. Since that time, she assured me, they had lived separate lives, each going about their daily business. Nearly a decade later their relationship had eased into a relatively amicable form of cohabitation. “He won't let go of me,” she told me with a shrug, ending the story.

Like the first, this second version of the story maintains a narrative sequence in which Nazaré is unaware of her rival's death until the *comadre's* phone call, and the involvement of the *exu* spirits is highlighted with new details that develop the associations. In particular there is a new plot twist: the mistress's death is presented as the result of a *demanda*, an *exu*-authored *trabalho* that backfired due to the superior powers of Nazaré's own spiritual protection. The cryptic nature of the death is accentuated by the description of the mistress as young and pretty, details that make her death all the more mysterious and unexpected.

In addition to the implied metaphysical warfare waged by proxy in the form of a *demanda*, Nazaré's second version of the story features two significant alterations to the basic sequence of events: the possession episode that heralds the mistress's death is said to occur at a crossroads, and the time of the death is given as midnight. Of course the crossroads and the hour of midnight are places and times intimately associated with *exu* spirits. Thus at several points in both versions of the story and in several ways Nazaré signals the involvement of *exu* spirits in the events surrounding the death of *aquela moça*—both the death itself and, more significantly, the manner in which Nazaré herself found out about it.

In the context of her narrative Nazaré herself is not to blame for the mistress's untimely death; indeed she is not aware of the *fogo cruzado* (crossfire), the mystical battle being waged on her behalf by her spiritual defender Maria Molambo until the death itself confirms it after the fact. At the same time, Molambo's involvement in the death is suggested by symbolically resonant details that go beyond the example of

her sudden and unbidden possession of Nazaré that evening. Disavowing any part in the events that resulted in the death of the mistress, Nazaré constructed a narrative in which Maria Molambo was the sole agent. The elimination of Nazaré's rival and the reconstruction of her conjugal household result from Maria Molambo's protection and vengeance, a narrative construction that assigns power, knowledge, and agency to the spirit and weakness, ignorance, and passivity to Nazaré herself.

Partly this is an effect of the discursive conventions structuring narratives about the *exu* spirits. Stories about these entities emphasize the mystery of their unpredictable eruptions into the human world, contrasting the occult knowledge and power of the spirits with humans' limited faculties. But operant in Nazaré's story is a complex displacement and simultaneous appropriation of this mysterious spiritual power that also is structured by normative codes of wifely (and husbandly) behavior. In fact conventional notions about men and women, husbands and wives, are central elements in stories about Pomba Gira. Closer analysis of "Maria Molambo's Final Vengeance" indicates how such discourse may be strategically useful within the larger social environment of the urban periphery.

WIFELY HONOR AND THE VIRTUOUS WOMAN

It is significant that both versions of Nazaré's story ended with the reconstitution of her household and thus her status as a wife. The philandering husband returned in defeat, the protective vengeance of Maria Molambo having vanquished his mistress, his job, and finally his autonomy. He returned a broken man. Nazaré herself remained virtuous; it was due to the weighty history of their years together that she took him back and only as a result of Nilmar's actions that she took her own lover. At least at the level of narrative Maria Molambo vindicated Nazaré by punishing Nilmar. Thanks to the supernatural agency of Pomba Gira, Nazaré's family was restored, her honor reestablished, and her husband humbled. In 2000 Nazaré summed up her marriage in this way: "I am the head of the household and he has screwed up his life. He lost everything because of a woman. Molambo did him in. He can't get ahead, he can't advance, not even I can help him. It is the castigation that he must carry with him. He lost everything. Everything, everything, everything. It was his punishment."

Perhaps reluctant to disavow all agency, however, in her retelling of the story Nazaré added a twist, confiding to me, "[That woman] died

not only because of this *trabalho* but because she knew that [Nilmar] was still in love with me.” In this second version Nazaré provided a motive for the *demanda* that backfired: the mistress, jealous of Nazaré’s hold on the man they shared in common, sought to avenge herself on her rival through black magic. Although this vengeance backfired tragically for the mistress, it also highlighted Nazaré’s rightful claim: the love and material support of her husband as his wife and the mother of his children, a claim that is usurped unjustly by the mistress and one for which she is punished.

In both versions of the story Nilmar’s wrongs were righted through mystical actions that reestablished the household, preserving the honor and virtue of the scorned wife while punishing the husband’s transgressions. Simultaneously Nazaré herself was removed from any knowledge of, and by implication involvement in, these events. As her narration of the story constructed it, this state of affairs was the result of her superior moral claims buttressed by the force of Maria Molambo. Thus Nazaré worked to resignify the course of events that led to Nilmar’s return to the household in a way that restored her dignity and granted her a degree of agency: Nilmar returned to her not because he had nowhere else to go, but because her spiritual protector had rendered it so; she took him in not as a scorned wife, but as the morally correct and blameless victor, avenged by Pomba Gira. It is she who is now head of the household. The final implication of the story is that although her husband continues to sleep around, he does so not because he prefers others, but because she will not have him.

Yet Nazaré claimed her position as head of the household not as an independent, single woman, but as a wife. The conditions under which her husband returned to the household are portrayed to underscore not only her moral claim but her power over him, through the interventions of Molambo. In the working-class neighborhood where Nazaré resides, the intact home is integral to a wife’s honor, and a woman whose husband has left her for another is looked on with a mixture of pity and scorn. Divorce, although common, also reflects poorly on a woman’s reputation, and a mature single woman is an anomaly. Significantly the presence of her husband in the household also protected Nazaré against the accusations of immorality that incorporating the spirit of a prostitute would otherwise expose her to. As the popular Umbandista writer Teixeira Alves Neto opined, unless they take stringent precautions “all female mediums who work with Pomba-Giras eventually succumb to prostitution,” and “even a male medium working with Pomba-Gira may

become more effeminate,” a sentiment I heard expressed in different ways by others.³

Guarding her reputation as a chaste wife and mother is one way that Nazaré, and women like her, defuse similar accusations. As Nazaré was fond of saying, “Molambo is a woman of the street, a prostitute, doing good and bad, unrestrained. Nazaré is the opposite of her: she is subdued, only does good, is a mother, and a faithful wife.” Although Nazaré needed Maria Molambo to protect her from her husband’s treachery, she also needed Nilmar to buttress her against the overwhelming potency of Pomba Gira’s mythology, to make this figure deployable within a domesticated morality.

THE IMMORAL AS A MORAL DISCOURSE

The Freudian splitting of Nazaré’s narrative is evident: it is not through her own agency but through the agency of Pomba Gira—a woman of the street, the very antithesis of the wife and mother—that Nazaré’s household is reconstituted and Nazaré herself is able to reclaim her place as wife and mother. By assigning vengeance to Maria Molambo, Nazaré preserved her virtue. But a Freudian analysis does not exhaust the complex configurations of local meaning that this story depends on, nor can it account for the density of its symbolic language. For instance, gendered notions of propriety involving the values associated with *casa* and *rua*, wifely honor and husbandly duty, are central to understanding how the story functions for its audience.

Within the gender norms of the urban periphery, women are expected to become wives and mothers whose activities are limited largely to the domestic sphere, whose reputations are contingent on their management of the household, and who are dependent on their husband for the financial support of the household—a position of limited autonomy. Further this position is constantly threatened by a sexual double standard that permits the husband sexual partners outside of the marital bond while compelling the wife’s fidelity. Nazaré’s ongoing distress over her husband’s alleged philandering, initially manifested in the form of behavioral disturbances, is a poignant reminder of the precariousness of this situation for women.

As I have noted, Nilmar’s infidelity was a predominant theme in many of Nazaré’s stories, where it functioned as the framework within which the story unfolded, either as a precipitating cause or as a backdrop to the events narrated. What is most striking about these narra-

tives is the flagrancy of Nilmar's disloyalty. This is expressed in florid examples: Nazaré births their first child alone because he is with another woman; he makes love to the maid as she lies unconscious in the same bed; even his mother is complicit in his many indiscretions. The very outrageousness of Nilmar's behavior in these stories suggests that they serve not as factual accounts to be understood literally, but rather as illustrations of something deeper: Nilmar's failure to grant Nazaré the respect that she is due as his wife. As she once put it to me in less extravagant terms, "I am your wife, okay, and you are my husband. So you are my husband, I am with you, I am married to you. And you are always with other women. You have a good position in society. You have a maid. Everyone defers to you. And I, being your wife, I know that you are eyeing the maid in my house, I know that you have lovers out on the streets. What respect are you giving me?"

As this makes clear, Nazaré suspected Nilmar of eyeing other women not only out on the streets but in the home, the domestic domain of wifely authority. It is this transgression perhaps more than anything else that exemplified his disrespect. Even though married men often are thought, and even expected, to have lovers "out on the streets," a proper husband shows respect for his wife by conducting these affairs with discretion. For a man to pursue his extramarital affairs in a public manner is to display his lack of respect for his wife by making her the focus of neighborhood gossip. But to have a lover in the home, or to take one from within the bounds of the domestic sphere, is an almost unthinkable affront. It represents an act that not only subjects a man's wife to deleterious public gossip, but strikes at the heart of her only domain of power and authority. Thus even more than Nilmar's philandering itself, an activity that is socially tolerated in any case, it is the flagrant lack of respect demonstrated by his philandering and its resultant humiliation that typified Nazaré's accounts of marital conflict.

Against this backdrop Nazaré's stories about the spirits highlighted their allegiance and protection. Whereas the figure of her husband represented an invariable source of disrespect and disappointment in Nazaré's narratives, Molambo and her other spirits never failed her, even when, as in *Espírito Santo*, she had abandoned them. A common theme of these stories is the active intervention of the spirits, particularly Maria Molambo, who show Nazaré, in one form or another, the proof of her husband's disloyalty. Within the logic of these narratives it is the secret and irrefutable knowledge made available to her by Molambo that establishes a ground for Nazaré to act against Nilmar. And by strategically

employing these discursive constructions Nazaré presented herself as acting not as a spurned wife, in a position of dishonor and weakness—a wife whose allegations may be challenged by male authority and the culture of machismo—but as a righteous woman whose knowledge is sanctioned by a greater, spiritual authority. Perhaps paradoxically it was through the agency of a prostitute that Nazaré attempted to preserve her position as a virtuous wife. In this way stories about Pomba Gira can function as a moral discourse, reconfiguring right and wrong by exploiting ambiguities or contradictions within the structures that buttress dominant morality.

GENDER AND THE SPIRITS

Although in real life Nazaré could do little to prevent her husband from cheating on her, in her narration of these incidents she is never the ignorant dupe. Rather these stories positioned her as having access to the superior force of the spirits who can be counted on to defend her. Given the high social tolerance for male infidelity and a structure of gender norms that associates moral femininity with wifeliness, women like Nazaré have few other resources to mobilize against an unfaithful husband. In situations like this one, the behavioral expectations for masculinity (i.e., virility as indexed through sexual prowess) directly conflict with those for femininity (wifeliness as indexed through the intact household). Narratives about Pomba Gira speak to these contradictions, translating them into the language of spiritual strife and mystical reprisal. For these and other reasons women appeal to Pomba Gira far more often, and in greater numbers, than do men.⁴

Stories about Pomba Gira thus constitute a form of gendered discourse, a set of resources and an articulatory framework through which women (and other marginalized persons) negotiate the relations of power within which they find themselves and attempt to pursue their own interests in situations marked by inherent inequalities and conflicts. Typically these conflicts are produced at the structural level, in situations where culturally constructed norms of masculinity and femininity are in direct opposition or riven by internal contradictions.

A characteristic frame of these narratives, like “Maria Molambo’s Final Vengeance,” pits a woman and her supernatural protector against a male lover or husband. This has led some observers to conclude that women’s stories about Pomba Gira (or other *exu* spirits) usually lead to a redefinition of roles for the couple in a way that benefits the woman.⁵

Because the existence of powerful spiritual forces itself is not in question, husbands like Nilmar find themselves with little recourse against their wives' claims. Nilmar's equivocal acquiescence to Molambo's role in the loss of his job suggests the weakness of his position when re-framed within the terms of Nazaré's narrative.

The utility of Pomba Gira discourse for women becomes even more apparent when we consider how gender intersects with reputation. Whereas men have recourse to the use of force to defend themselves from attacks on their person or dignity, women, for whom force is not a socially licit option, tend to use indirect, discursive means. Like gossip, another gendered discourse stereotypically associated with women and other subordinate groups, stories about Pomba Gira can serve as a subversive strategy of critique, defense, or attack. Unlike gossip, however, claims about Pomba Gira cannot be so easily minimized as inconsequential or dismissed as petty. Thus whereas gossip and other forms of stereotypically feminine discourse rarely pose a threat to extant power relations—particularly those of gender—successful appeals to Pomba Gira can result in significant realignments. In the same way that men control and benefit from “official,” socially dominant forms of discourse such as law, theology, politics, and conventional notions about gender, women and other marginalized groups benefit from Pomba Gira discourse, which reflects their interests and goals.⁶

Because stories about Pomba Gira introduce new agencies and interpretive possibilities for the events they recount, the narrative process, as Robert Orsi observed of midcentury American Catholic women's devotions to St. Jude, does not so much recast events of the past in a new, symbolic register as permit the “reexperiencing of experience in a new way.”⁷ By appealing to Maria Molambo as an agent of transformation, Nazaré resituated the pain and humiliation she had felt at Nilmar's treachery within a larger drama of spiritual protection and vengeance.

Nevertheless outside of the world of Nazaré's narrative the situation was more complex; economic factors, for example, also played a role in Nilmar and Nazaré's reconciliation. Nazaré did not want to divorce Nilmar so much as ensure his commitment to her household, which was constantly being undermined, at least in her mind, by his extramarital affairs. Nilmar, having lost his job and residence, had few other options but to reconcile with Nazaré. Invoking Maria Molambo as the causal force in the sequence of events that led to this reconciliation, Nazaré sought to redefine the terms of the relationship in a way that preserved her dignity.

Not surprisingly my own interviews with Nilmar suggested that the events of real life were murkier than Nazaré portrayed them in her narratives. For example, he reported that he had suspected that Nazaré was cheating on him, particularly in the early years of their marriage, when she was subject to the periodic episodes of unusual behavior that both she and he would later understand as possessions by Maria Molambo. Explaining how she would leave the house suddenly without telling him, Nilmar remarked, “I thought it was her cynicism. Something to irritate me so that I would leave her. I thought that she wanted me to go away, that she had other lovers, you see?”

As Nilmar’s comments indicate, both he and Nazaré interpreted each other’s behavior through the lens of mutual distrust and suspicion, a situation that may well have fueled infidelities on both sides. However, neither party ever admitted to me that they had cheated on the other, and Nazaré was careful always to frame her adventures in Espírito Santo as a consequence of Nilmar’s treachery. Nevertheless the events that precipitated Maria Molambo’s final vengeance seemed to mark a turning point in their marriage. Nilmar characterized the couple’s present relationship in this way: “[Nazaré] knows what we have together. We live together but we lead our separate lives.”

THE AMBIGUOUS POTENTIAL OF THE SPIRITS

Clearly, working with Pomba Gira helped Nazaré address the humiliation that she felt at Nilmar’s alleged infidelities. It also helped her to establish a meaningful identity apart from that of Nilmar’s wife. As a *zelador* she was able to achieve things that, as a *dona-de-casa*, she could not: greater autonomy, social recognition and prestige, and an independent income and other material benefits. But while it altered the power relations in her marriage in some ways, in other ways it did not. Far from resolving her troubles with Nilmar, working with the spirits also exacerbated the tensions in their domestic life, creating problems that were not themselves resolvable through appeal to the supernatural agency of the spirits.

For instance, Nilmar frequently complained that Nazaré’s spirit work required her to be absent from the house for long periods of time, interfering with their home life and her role as his wife. Eventually he concluded that Nazaré wasn’t married to him, she was “married to the spirits.” This gave him a license to spend more and more time away

from home, further deepening Nazaré's suspicions that he was seeing other women and fueling her need for Maria Molambo's protection.

For her part Nazaré emphasized the difficulties that working with the spirits had provoked in her home life. She complained of the pressure she felt to *amenizar os dois lados*, or appease both sides, balancing Nilmar's demands with her obligations to the spirits. As we have seen, each relationship reinforced the need for the other: while Nazaré considered Maria Molambo an important spiritual ally against her husband's treachery, Nilmar's presence in the household also protected her against the damaging suspicions that working with the spirit of a prostitute would otherwise expose her to. The dilemma, as Nazaré explained it, lay in the fact that "if you choose one or the other, you've already lost." Better to opt for the compromise position of appeasing both sides.

As Adeline Masquelier observed, spirit possession does not so much solve or simplify situations as it "thickens them—introducing new agencies, new relations, and new perspectives."⁸ Working with Molambo did not simply permit Nazaré to impose her will on Nilmar through the guise of the spirit. Neither did it empower her to leave her husband definitively and strike out on her own. Rather by acknowledging Maria Molambo's protection, Nazaré introduced yet another *vontade*, or will that had to be managed, one whose logic was not always consonant with her own desires and whose demands on her time and energy had to be balanced against Nilmar's.⁹

In the end, although Molambo became a supernatural ally in her struggles with Nilmar, the agency and opportunities that the spirit provided Nazaré were neither unambiguous nor straightforward. Though Nazaré emphasized that Molambo had avenged her by punishing Nilmar, the spirit's actions also had the effect of making her life considerably harder, because the loss of Nilmar's job meant that Nazaré became responsible for the family's finances. Neither did Molambo's actuation significantly alter the conflicts and mutual distrust that marked the couple's domestic life. What changed was that through her religious practice Nazaré found a powerful way to articulate an identity and reputation apart from that of Nilmar's wife and the mother of his children—a transformation that was understood to derive not from her own will, but that of the spirits. This was, however, not without its own price: a lifelong obligation to serve the spirits that would constrain Nazaré's life in different, but perhaps equally rigorous ways. Against those who have argued that spirit

possession effectively empowers women in their struggles with men, Nazaré's experiences suggest that its outcomes are never entirely predictable or reducible to uncomplicated moments of empowerment.

Her example also indicates that despite Pomba Gira's manifold associations with sexual and moral transgression, it would be a mistake to see this figure solely as an agent of resistance to or as wholly undermining the authority of dominant norms, structures, or values. Contrary to what we might expect of a spirit described as a woman of the street, Maria Molambo did not appear in Nazaré's stories as a force that challenged or undermined Nazaré's position as a *dona-de-casa*. Indeed rather than subverting the normative schema of gender relations, Molambo's actions enabled Nazaré to preserve her wifely role while reconfiguring the conjugal relationship after Nilmar's excesses blurred the boundaries between *casa* and *rua*. In effect Nazaré's appeals to Molambo enabled her to discursively reconstruct her relationship with Nilmar after a particularly humiliating incident and to reposition him within the domesticated morality of the *casa*—but now in a desexualized relationship to her.

While myths and songs about Pomba Gira emphasize her transgression of social norms, the reality of the spirit's presence in women's lives is far more complex. Among other things, the women who incarnate this spirit must constantly find ways to domesticate her subversive potential, lest her aggressive sexuality compromise their own reputation. One way women do this is by emphasizing their status as proper wives and mothers, as we saw in Nazaré's case. Another is by "indoctrinating" the spirit, that is, socializing her more outrageous habits. As Nazaré explained, when she first began working with Molambo the spirit's aggressively erotic behavior was a problem: "When she arrived [in a ceremony], the way she greeted people was a scandal, and this almost caused a separation with my husband. . . . So the *zelador* took her and said that she could embrace everyone but she couldn't shake her hips. Because she thought that hugging and *rebolando* [shaking her hips] was what you did. No, it isn't that way. So she was indoctrinated, and now she embraces everyone respectfully. But before that she was really deprevaded. Because she was a woman of the street, you know."

Yet another way that the spirit is indoctrinated is by persuading her to help those in need of spiritual assistance. In the next chapter I discuss the distinctive *trabalhos*, or ritual works, by which *zeladores* claim to channel Pomba Gira's ambivalent power to resolve other people's dilemmas.

PART FOUR

Practice

Working with Pomba Gira

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If God Is All Good, Then Only the Devil Can Combat Evil

Exu não brinca
Exu não é brincadeira
Se Deus é bom
O diabo não é mal
Salve quem pode mais.

Exu doesn't fool around
Exu is not a joke
If God is good
The Devil isn't bad
Hail to the strongest.

—*Ponto cantado* from author's fieldwork, Rio de Janeiro, 2000

It's not surprising, then, that the cult to Pomba Gira is part of the hidden side of Afro-Brazilian religions, or that it is known by the name *quimbanda*, because the basic motivations of the cult concern dimensions of the individual that are suppressed within the moral standards of Western, Christian society.

—Reginaldo Prandi, *Herdeiras do axé*

TRABALHO DE AMARRAÇÃO

Margarida was desperate. For several months, she confided to me, she had nurtured a lingering suspicion that her husband, Severino, was seeing another woman. On more than one occasion she had detected the scent of a strange perfume lingering on his clothing when he returned home in the afternoon to catch a few hours of sleep before working a

second job as a nighttime security guard. She felt certain that he was investing the money he had promised to set aside for improvements to their small house on the seduction of this new paramour. When a *comadre* reported spotting Severino near one of the several love motels that lined the highway leading out of town, Margarida's worst fears were confirmed. On this woman's advice, Margarida called Nazaré.

Several times a week Nazaré consulted with paying clients like Margarida who sought her help with domestic conflicts, tensions, illness, unemployment, or other persistent social, psychological, interpersonal, or physical problem. Using the divination technique called *jogo de búzios*, the throwing of the cowrie shells, Nazaré consulted her spirit guides to determine the origin of her client's troubles and the appropriate course of its resolution. By asking questions and "reading" the spirits' responses in the random patterns of the *jogo's* sixteen cowrie shells, Nazaré arrived at a diagnosis of the situation. In this form of divination each throw of the shells generates a different combination of their open and closed sides and thus a new communication, disclosing new possibilities of interpretation. By posing open-ended questions to the client for whom she was doing the reading, Nazaré eliminated certain interpretive possibilities and pursued others. In this way the various parties involved in the consultation circled slowly around the trouble that had brought the person to Nazaré, probing its various dimensions.

Treatment might involve any number of ritual services intended to strengthen the individual's relationship with tutelary *guias*, or spirit guides, feed a neglected or hungry spirit, counteract malignant forces, or expel a troublesome entity. In some particularly intransigent cases the *jogo de búzios* indicated to Nazaré that the afflicted person needed to undergo the preliminary rituals of initiation consecrating him or her to the lifelong service of a particular *orixá*. A serious and costly undertaking, initiation was embarked upon only in response to grave problems interpreted as the call of the *orixá* who was the *dono* (owner) or ruler of the afflicted person's head, and usually only after a series of other rituals failed to ameliorate the situation.

The *jogo* that she performed for Margarida confirmed to Nazaré that her new client needed several *trabalhos* done, including a *trabalho de amarração* (love spell) to bind Severino more closely to her.¹ Fortunately, Nazaré assured the younger woman, Margarida had come to her in time: her rival's hold over Severino was weak, and the other woman had not yet succeeded in turning him completely away from his rightful

spouse. But action had to be taken immediately; Margarida would need to return the following week with two photographs, one of Severino and one of herself, as well as a couple of buttons from a shirt or a pair of socks that he had worn recently, in addition to several other items available for purchase from one of the small shops catering to Afro-Brazilian religious practitioners scattered across the city.

Before any real work could be done, though, Margarida would need to purify both her house and herself by performing a *limpeza*, a cleansing ritual intended to neutralize the effects of whatever spell her rival had cast. Nazaré instructed Margarida to wash each room in her home from top to bottom with water in which she had cooked some *canjica* (white hominy), taking care to sweep the water out of the doorway and into the street. Once this was done Margarida was to place the cooked *canjica* on a white plate in an out-of-the-way location, placing next to it a large, white candle that she must keep burning for three days straight. After the three days had passed Margarida was to wrap the *canjica* in a white cloth and place it in the woods.

Upon cleaning the house in the proscribed manner, Margarida was then to place a clean glass of water behind each of the doors in her house that led to the street, replacing its contents with fresh water daily for three days. The water would absorb any malicious influences or negative energies from the outside before they could again take up residence. Once her house had been purified Margarida should then bathe herself from top to bottom from a basin of warm water to which she had added white rose petals, coconut water, and a dollop of honey. She should let this mixture dry on her skin, Nazaré cautioned, before putting on fresh white clothes. This procedure also was to be repeated for a total of three days. Finally Nazaré warned Margarida that she should refrain from drinking coffee, cola, tea, or other dark-colored beverages during this three-day period.

The following week, having dutifully performed these purifications, Margarida returned with the items that Nazaré had directed her to purchase, which included a bottle of sweet red vermouth, seven open red roses, a large terra cotta container, seven black candles, seven single cigarettes, a package of manioc flour, a bottle of palm oil, a jar of honey, a fresh coconut, and a small package of *erva doce* (“sweet herb” or anise), in addition to the two photos and buttons from one of Severino’s shirts. The first seven of these items would be used to create a *despacho*, or votive offering for Maria Molambo and the remainder for a *trabalho de amarração* on Margarida’s behalf.

In its general outline Margarida's story was typical of Nazaré's predominantly female clients, who tended to procure her services for domestic and relationship issues, whereas her male clients sought assistance almost exclusively for difficulties in the working world. The nature of Margarida's complaint fell squarely within the domain of Pomba Gira, whose specific "vibratory force," in the words of *The Red Book of Pomba Gira*, an instructional manual of spells and rituals for invoking the spirit, "is destined to realize diverse trabalhos related with love, sex, and all the ties to the opposite sex."² Thus Maria Molambo's assistance would be required. The *despacho* would ensure the spirit's favor, and the *trabalho de amarração* would direct the force of her mystical power into strengthening the bond between Margarida and her husband.

For both scholars and lay people alike, such attempts to manipulate supernatural forces for an individual's personal gain usually are labeled "magic" and opposed to the collective and ostensibly beneficent practices that define "religion." Grounded in theories of primitive religion developed in the late nineteenth century, this division is linked to a long history of efforts by scholars to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate forms of engaging the supernatural based on an implicit model of religion that looked very much like Christianity.³ One consequence of this history is that each term carries a particular moral resonance; while *religion* denotes a set of practices oriented to the supernatural that is construed as authentic and beneficent, *magic* implies an illicit and potentially maleficent set of practices.

Rather than describing meaningful differences in the ways that humans engage or seek to employ supernatural powers, this terminological distinction reflects discursive and political concerns more than practical realities.⁴ That is to say, what differentiates magic from religion on the ground is not necessarily the particular characteristics or objectives of the practices in question but the social location of their practitioners in relation to the speaker. This is especially clear in the case of Afro-Brazilian religions, which, until quite recently, were labeled magic and their practitioners subject to formal and informal forms of discrimination. As this suggests, magic tends to be a discourse of accusation rather than self-affirmation.

Like other dichotomous schemas of classification, the putative opposition between religion and magic exaggerates differences at the expense of similarities. By falsely splitting off some forms of knowledge and ritual practice from others, it authorizes a certain set of practices

by stigmatizing another set. To avoid these problems, I prefer to define *despachos* and other *trabalhos* as ritual acts intended to produce a particular outcome in the human world through the agency of the spirits. From this perspective, just as Christians attempt to solicit supernatural assistance through prayers or *promessas* (promises) made to favorite saints, Pomba Gira's petitioners believe that their *trabalhos* mobilize the spirit to *abrir os caminhos* (open the pathways) for the resolution of a personal dilemma or *fechar os caminhos* (close the pathways) of an adversary or rival.

In this chapter I analyze the distinctive *trabalhos* associated with Pomba Gira and other *exu* spirits as strategic ritual acts that disclose a particular view of the world at the same time that they are intended to produce concrete effects in that world. Beginning with a general discussion of *trabalhos* in the next section, I then examine the specific nature of the transformations that these ritual works are believed to effect, and what this reveals about the participants' worldview. *Trabalhos* like those that Nazaré performed for Margarida not only permit their beneficiaries to conceptualize and endeavor to bring to fruition alternative scenarios for their lives; they also offer poignant testimony about what could be termed the micropolitics of power: the ways that gender, social marginalization, and systematic inequality work together to delimit the life chances of men and women living in Rio's urban periphery.

TRABALHOS, DESPACHOS, AND OTHER SPIRITUAL WORKS

Taken in the broadest sense, all Afro-Brazilian ritual can be considered a type of *trabalho*, that is, a way of working with the spirits in order to bring their power, knowledge, and blessings to the human world. Thus people say that they work with the spirits, and the latter, in returning to the human world to manifest in the bodies of their devotees, also work. More narrowly the term *trabalho* also denotes private rituals that are intended to produce a specific result in the life of an individual: returning a lover, reversing a particular misfortune, healing a specific illness.

These more narrowly focused *trabalhos* range from the relatively simple act of petitioning a particular spirit by lighting a candle or offering a gift of food or drink, to more involved operations such as manufacturing charms, performing *limpezas* and *ebós* (offerings of special foods), and conducting multistage ritual works, or *trabalhos grandes*,



FIGURE 17. *Ebó* (food offering).

that require the preparation of various substances and foods, animal sacrifices, symbolic gestures, prayers, and music or song (figure 17). Much of the day-to-day spiritual work carried out by *zeladores* like Nazaré involves manufacturing and executing *trabalhos* on behalf of clients and *filhos-de-santo*.

Such *trabalhos* involve the ritual use of symbolically resonant material items that function as a medium through which (or as a result of which) spiritual powers are charged to intervene in an undesirable state of human affairs. For example, *trabalhos de amarração* and other works intended to influence a third person typically include symbolic substances that metonymically represent their victim, such as a piece of clothing or small amounts of hair or nail clippings. They also may contain items that Robert Farris Thompson, in his discussion of Central African influences in New World black cultures, characterized as “spirit embodying,” that is, substances that metonymically represent the spirit world, such as cemetery dust or *pemba* (white chalk or clay).⁵

In addition to these spirit-embodying materials, *trabalhos de amarração* may include what Thompson referred to as “spirit-directing” substances. These are materials that metaphorically designate the desired

operation or effect of the *trabalho*; for example, hot substances like pepper and alcohol ensure a strong or rapid effect; coconut, honey, and *erva doce* “sweeten” its effect; magnets attract or summon a desired object; and mirrors deflect that which is not desired. Symbolic ritual actions such as tying, binding, loosening, and placing something upside down or right side up add further specificity to these works. Once ritually activated, these highly condensed, polysemic works mobilize and direct the spirit to whom they are addressed to perform a specific task.

Because of this specificity there is no standard formula or recipe, although innumerable books proffer instructions and lists of ingredients for working various *trabalhos*. “In spirit work, two plus two is never four,” one *zelador* told me, adding, “It’s just like medicine—it is not an exact science.” Each person’s situation is unique, a product of the interplay between her own protective spirits and other forces, people, or events in her life. In combination with the *jogo de búzios*, experienced *zeladores* draw on their intuition and personal knowledge and careful listening and other therapeutic skills to identify the root causes of a client’s problem and to arrive at a specific course of action for its treatment.

Like any other form of work, *trabalhos* involve action and intention on the part of human beings as well as the spiritual entities believed to be the source of their active power. No matter how powerful the spirit or skillful the *zelador*, such works will not be completely effective unless the client for whom they are made also directs her mental powers toward the realization of her desires. For this reason the ritual process of activating *trabalhos* ordinarily requires the client to become mindful of her specific goals, most often by writing them out on small pieces of paper or repeatedly verbalizing them. The various processes involved in the manufacture and activation of an individual *trabalho* forge ties of reciprocity and obligation that bind the client for whom the ritual is performed, the *zelador* who orchestrates it, and the spirit entity who is believed to be the agentive force.

Votive offerings of food and other items dedicated specifically to Pomba Gira or another *exu* spirit, as well as the rituals that accompany them, are called *despachos*.⁶ More than a simple gift, a *despacho* is a complex assemblage of material goods that are carefully arranged and placed at a location associated with the particular spirit to whom the *despacho* is dedicated.⁷ As in Margarida’s case, these usually are offered as part of a *pedido*, or request for the spirit’s intervention. *Despachos* for Pomba Gira typically include food and drink favored by that spirit,

such as *cachaça*, champagne, or sweet wine, *farofa* (a dish of toasted manioc flour), fresh or barbecued meat, cigarettes, jewelry, red roses, and other material objects.

The *despacho* that Nazaré prepared for Margarida, for example, included wine, red roses, candles, cigarettes, and a *farofa* that Nazaré prepared with red palm oil. Arrayed in the terra cotta container that Margarida provided, these items were placed before Molambo's *assentamento* (altar), where they remained for three days before being ritually discarded in the local cemetery, a preferred locale for Maria Molambo of the Seven Catacombs. The items of food and drink included in any *despacho* customarily are presented ready for the spirit's consumption; the bottles are opened or their contents served in a cup, and the cigarettes are lit. The spirit then is summoned by *pontos cantados* or *pontos riscados* (graphic symbols drawn on the ground) to receive his or her offerings.⁸

Because *despachos* often are placed in an outdoor area associated with the particular spirit for whom they are intended, their remains frequently are in evidence at crossroads, cemeteries, beaches, parks, and other public places. The Brazilian anthropologist Yvonne Maggie captured both the ubiquity of these offerings and the residual fear that they inspire in passersby: "No one who passes through Rio de Janeiro can fail to notice the *despachos*, candles, and offerings found at beaches, waterfalls, and parks. These offerings manifest themselves insistently, despite the fact that they are manufactured in secret. Mothers don't let their small children approach such dangerous things. Who can forget the childish fear of seeing a candle, black chicken, snakeskin, urn with *farofa*, red and black cloths, bottle of *cachaça* arrayed on the corner?"⁹

As Maggie noted, *despachos* constitute public evidence of otherwise clandestine ritualizing, and their persistent presence in the public spaces of the city tends to discomfit those who happen upon them in the course of their daily business. A visible and disturbing sign that unknown persons have mobilized potentially dangerous powers for arcane ends, *despachos* remind the general public that lurking beneath the everyday world of appearances are obscure forces and intentions whose occult operations make their effects felt in unpredictable ways. Such is their ambivalent power that most *cariocas* go out of their way to avoid *despachos* lest they (or their children) become the unwitting target of their force field. "If you pass one," the *zelador* Fábio warned me, "and you have a weak guardian angel or you're spiritually unbalanced and then you pass



FIGURE 18. Sign in Rio advertising spiritual works.

there in the middle [of the *despacho*], its force transfers to you, and what happens? It complicates your life.”

Rio’s public spaces insistently manifest other signs of private ritualizing involving Pomba Gira and other Afro-Brazilian spirit entities. Throughout the city homemade placards plastered on street lamps and public telephones advertise a variety of *trabalhos espirituais* (spiritual works), promising, among other things, to bring back an errant lover, ensure a spouse’s fidelity, or rekindle a couple’s erotic passion (figure 18). Such *trabalhos de amarração* are one of the most frequently requested spiritual works in any *zelador*’s repertoire. Nazaré explained their popularity in this way: “Men go out, they have women outside on the streets, when one [relationship] ends, they arrange another. Women, no. When a woman finds a man, she wants to keep him, she wants to ensure that he has eyes only for her. And it’s not easy. So they come to me.”

To be sure, the quest for love is universal. But among lower- and working-class women whose reputations are closely identified with marriage and domesticity, finding and keeping a husband takes on a particular urgency. For women caught in the contradictions of a social environment that permits, if not encourages, men to acquire many sexual

partners while stigmatizing female infidelity, *trabalhos de amarração* promise to activate the power of Pomba Gira to enchant the object of a woman's affections and firmly bind him to her.

The following *pedido* (request) that I came across on a virtual altar dedicated to Pomba Gira conveys something of the poignancy and anguish that are characteristic of women's appeals to this entity:

Beautiful Queen, I come to you with my heartfelt request that he returns passionately to me, loving me more and with enormous desire to be at my side . . . that his heart be full of love for me so that he asks me to come back to him, that the love he feels for me consumes his heart so that he sees me everywhere he goes, that he smells me everywhere he goes, and that he misses my face, body, kiss, embrace, and feels nothing but how much he misses me. That he is not embarrassed of me, and takes me to all of the places that he goes, even where his friends are: barbecues, parties, bars, everywhere that he frequents. . . . That he can't and doesn't want to look at any other woman and when a woman approaches him that his heart closes because of the depth of his love for me, and with this that he thinks "I must ask her (me) to return to me before I lose her forever," that everywhere he looks he sees me and remembers me and misses me.¹⁰

The palpable distress in this woman's desire to reunite with her beloved, who apparently has left her for another, and the detailed enumeration of the ways he should feel her absence are typical of the genre. This example also illustrates one of the ways that petitioners focus their intentions on a desired outcome through elaborate instructions to the spirit entity charged with its realization.

As part of her own *trabalho de amarração*, Margarida was asked to verbalize her wishes in the presence of Maria Molambo herself. Due to various scheduling conflicts, Nazaré had decided to perform the ritual that would activate her client's *trabalho de amarração* in the course of Molambo's annual sacrifice, taking advantage of its auspicious setting. Accordingly Margarida had been asked to contribute two chickens to the small stable of animals that would be sacrificed in the spirit's honor by various members of the community and to attend the *toque* that would summon Molambo to receive her offerings.

The evening in question began with a truncated version of the characteristic *roda*, or circle dance particular to Afro-Brazilian religions. Once Molambo had arrived and been properly saluted with several *pontos cantados*, a small group of participants, including a fellow *zelandor* named Daniel whom Nazaré had asked to help out, the *terreiro's*

drummer, and Molambo herself, moved into the *casa de exu*, the small altar room where the *terreiro's exus* were seated, to begin the sacrifice. After greeting the various *exus* represented there, they summoned Margarida into the room. I followed along with Marisa, who was bearing a small package containing the two pictures that Margarida had provided Nazaré for this purpose. These had been placed face to face, sandwiched between two *imãs* (magnets), bound with string, and submerged in a small jar filled with the coconut water, honey, and *erva doce* that Margarida had also provided.

Marisa fished the bound pictures out of their jar and handed the dripping package to Molambo, who placed it in her glass of wine. Margarida was then asked to write her full name and that of her beloved on a piece of paper. Then, while Daniel held one of the two chickens that Margarida had purchased up to her face, Molambo instructed her to whisper what she wanted into its beak. After Margarida completed this task, Daniel cut the chicken's head off with a swift twist of his knife while the rest of us sang a *ponto cantado*. When the body had stopped convulsing, he handed it to Molambo, who opened its breast with her own small knife, plunged her hand inside, and pulled out the heart. This she pressed into Margarida's hands, telling her to visualize what she wanted.

Margarida closed her eyes and, after a minute, handed the heart back to Molambo, who took it and raised it to Margarida's face to eat. Aghast, Margarida refused, and so Molambo popped it into her own mouth instead, washing it down with a swig of wine and a hearty *gargalhada*. The same process was repeated with the second bird; then Daniel removed both birds' wings, heads, tails, and feet, handing these to Marisa, who placed them on Molambo's *assentamento*. Molambo then folded the two pieces of paper that Margarida had written on and impaled them on the trident-shaped *ferramenta* (iron) that protruded from her altar. "I am the devil!" she chortled with another *gargalhada*. "I am the devil and I am here to work." Leaning into Margarida she said sternly, "Don't worry, young lady, I, Maria Molambo, will protect you from your enemies and all who wish to hurt you. They try to deceive you but I am not deceived." Throwing back her head, she gave another *gargalhada*. As a *filha-de-santo* brought in another set of chickens, whose collective blood would fortify Molambo and the other *exus* for the coming year, Marisa escorted Margarida out of the room.

“MOLAMBO’S HEART IS IN THE SOLE OF HER FOOT”

As happened in Margarida’s case, Nazaré often determined that a client’s troubles originated in the malicious actions of other human beings. A persistent run of bad luck, an unexpected job loss, domestic strife, or a romantic setback were tell-tale signs that the client had been the target of a *trabalho feito*, a malicious work intended to *derrubar* (literally “knock down,” i.e., harm or bewitch) its victim. Although the precise identity of the *trabalho*’s author might be shrouded in mystery, it was never a total stranger. Nazaré and her followers shared the conviction that human beings are inclined toward treachery and that deep beneath the surface of mundane reality lay a hidden world of clandestine networks along whose pathways scarce material and immaterial resources flowed, accumulating in the hands of those capable of manipulating these occult channels. Domestic harmony, a partner’s sexual fidelity, job security, romantic attraction, health, and good fortune were, like material possessions, finite goods, whose scarcity and volatility ensured that there was never quite enough to go around. In this economy of scarcity one person’s good fortune entailed another’s suffering; one individual’s romantic conquest, another’s heartbreak. “Envy,” Nazaré warned me, “is the main cause of black magic.”

Initially I was taken aback by the pervasive sense of scarcity that colored people’s understanding of their lives and their willingness to attribute their problems to the nefarious and often inscrutable motives of others. It seemed to me that larger-scale economic and social forces could better account for a man’s inability to find a well-paying job or a woman’s failure to maintain the sexual attentions of her lover. But, as in E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s famous account of Azande witchcraft, there was another logic at work here, one grounded in a specific historical experience if not an entirely different worldview.¹¹

This logic more accurately reflected people’s everyday sense of a world in which a tiny, privileged sector of the population led lives of conspicuous abundance while the majority struggled just to make ends meet and the poor slipped further into abject misery. This was a world in which television disseminated lifestyles of consumption and display far beyond most people’s means, where a lifetime of hard and unrelenting toil was insufficient to support a family, and where, in the name of upholding law and order, police and other authorities engaged in criminal activities with impunity. All around, but perpetually out of reach, were signs of tremendous affluence whose benefits seemed to accrue to

the few while the majority suffered. Clearly there were powerful forces at work, whether encoded in law, channeled through subterranean networks of graft and corruption, or residing in a shadowy cabal of ambivalent spirit entities.

Little wonder, then, that some poor and working-class inhabitants of the urban periphery, lacking access to more formal avenues of power, justice, or influence, turned to the *exu* spirits for help with life's varied challenges. According to devotees, not only did these street-savvy *malandros* and prostitutes confront similar situations during their own earthly existence, but in a world marked by persistent inequities and human treachery *exus* actively fight on their petitioners' behalf. Unlike the *orixás* and other entities associated with the domesticated morality of the *casa*, *exu* spirits are equipped for battle in the dog-eat-dog world of the street. They embody a pragmatic morality that takes the world as it is—competitive, brutish, and short, as Thomas Hobbes would have it—not as humans might want it to be.

The following *ponto cantado*, which the members of Nazaré's community always sang when invoking Maria Molambo, conveys something of this worldview. A particular favorite, it never failed to generate enthusiastic singing by participants and audience members alike:

They made a bonfire
 A bonfire with which to kill me
 Everyone laughed
 Everyone applauded
 No one felt pain
 No one had compassion.
 Oh Molambo is
 A woman who doesn't have a heart
 Molambo's heart
 Is in the sole of her foot
 Molambo's heart
 Is in the sole of her foot.

Like *pontos cantados* in general, this one resonates on several different levels: mythological, historical, and personal. On the surface its dense, dream-like imagery suggests an innocent victim betrayed by a friend or neighbor and about to be burned at the stake before a crowd of cheering townspeople. Given Pomba Gira's connection to the medieval Iberian figure of the *feiticeira* (dangerous enchantress), this imagery

may refer to the Inquisition's preferred method of execution, although it would be difficult to prove such a connection beyond the song's own suggestively terse language.

Fire, however, is also a metaphor for another kind of spiritual warfare. Among the Afro-Brazilian practitioners I met, to *mandar fogo* ("send fire") is to mystically attack someone by deploying an *exu* spirit against him. A prudent *zelador* must always take care to protect both herself and her community from attempts to *queimar a casa* (literally, "burn [her] house"). In this sense the bonfire in the song can also refer to a malicious *trabalho* intended to harm (or in this case kill) its target. Indeed the particular gusto that always greeted this *ponto cantado* suggests that, at an experiential level, it expressed a sentiment shared by most in Nazaré's community: a pervasive sense of being alone in a dangerous world lacking compassion and empathy, vulnerable to the malevolent intentions of others.

In these situations only an entity whose heart is, like Maria Molambo's, "in the sole of her foot"—that is, an entity motivated by neither empathy nor compassion for human beings—can function as an effective spiritual ally. As Fábio informed me, "*Exus* work with and through human emotions and passions, but they themselves are not influenced by human sentiment." This quality makes *exu* spirits powerfully effective in defending their devotees from the attacks of others and in waging battle on their behalf.

But it also makes them treacherous figures, for unlike other spirits they are motivated by neither loyalty nor the altruistic desire to help their human followers. If a petitioner fails to provide a promised offering in a timely manner or commits some other error, intentional or not, the effort can backfire and the *exu* spirit for whom the offering is intended can turn on the petitioner with devastating results. "Don't mess with Pomba Gira, no," goes the line of another *ponto cantado* I often heard at Nazaré's, "for she's the point of the needle. The person who messes with Pomba Gira is digging his own grave."

This makes Pomba Gira and other *exu* spirits "a double-edged sword," as Nazaré put it. "[Exu] can work for good and he can work for evil, he can help you as much as he can hinder you. If you don't deserve it, he doesn't get in your way. If you do, he will fuck you up." Because of this volatility those who work with *exu* spirits must at least partially domesticate them, drawing them into relationships of productive exchange. Partly this is achieved by regularly "feeding" them with the blood of sacrificial animals, usually chickens or small goats. When

devidamente alimentado (properly fed), another *zelador* advised me, *exus* can be effectively directed to whatever ends that person desires.

When I asked Nazaré what would happen if she did not regularly feed her *exu* spirits, she responded that they could *dar uma quizila* (become antagonistic). “We try always to do right by them,” she explained. “If we are right with them, they are not lacking anything, everything is in order, then they don’t have the right [to turn on us]. . . . But if you make a mistake, you don’t have the right to blame them [for what happens].”

IF GOD IS GOOD, ONLY THE DEVIL CAN COMBAT EVIL

The potential danger involved in working with the *exu* spirits is captured perfectly in the notion of the *demanda*, a term that refers to the deployment of these spirits in acts of mystical warfare against a human adversary. “*Demanda*,” Nazaré informed me, “is when someone is *aborrecido* [abhors you], or doesn’t like you and doesn’t want you to succeed, and they send an *exu* spirit to *derrubar* [“topple” or harm] you.” “How do you know if someone has sent a *demanda* against you?” I asked her. “I feel it in my body, I feel it in my actions. I feel a burning sensation in my limbs like fire, or I feel heavy and can’t walk,” she replied. “I can’t resolve things. I am not able to progress, I am not able to move forward in whatever I am doing.” To counteract a *demanda*, Nazaré explained, she “throws the *búzios*” to determine what was done and then “reverses the *demanda* and sends it back to the person who sent it.”

The nefarious action of a *demanda* is a frequent diagnosis for individual and community maladies; just as an individual’s misfortune can be caused by a *demanda* unleashed by a rival, an entire community can be affected or a *terreiro* forced to close as the result of a *demanda* wrought by a rival *zelador* or a dissatisfied *filho-de-santo* nursing a grudge.¹² In this sense *demandas* represent jealousy, anger, hatred, or other negative emotions that can affect interpersonal relations and ripple out through the community. They are, to borrow a formulation of the Brazilian anthropologist Lísias Nogueira Negrão, “a symbolic expression of real conflicts transposed by the combatants to the spiritual world.”¹³

The fear of *demandas* is ubiquitous: stores catering to Afro-Brazilian religious practitioners stock innumerable products, including incense, packaged perfumes, room sprays, bath salts, and other paraphernalia claiming to *vence demanda* (defeat or overcome) *demandas*. *Exu* and *pomba gira* spirits are associated particularly with *demandas*, and their

formidable ability to both deploy and deflect them is highlighted in the following *pontos cantados* for Maria Molambo:

Demandas she does not reject,
 She loves to *demandar*.
 With her fearsome trident
 She loves to spear her enemies.¹⁴

Maria Molambo wears
 A beautiful skirt with seven tiny bells
 When she dances in *terreiros*
 Working *demandas*,
 She shows that she is just.¹⁵

What makes *demandas* so potent, according to Nazaré, is that *só manda fogo quem pode mandar*: the only one who sends fire is the one who is able. In other words, only *zeladores* and those who know how to *mexer no santo* (deal with the spirits), can *demandar*. And whoever prevails is superior. “If you have the ability to burn me and your reason is valid, you win,” Nazaré explained. “If you don’t, then I will send my own fire and I will burn you.” This state of spiritual warfare is known as *fogo cruzado*, or crossfire. As Nazaré described it, “*Fogo cruzado* is when you send a *demanda* against me and I find out. So I light a candle for my spirit to protect me, and you are the one who will fall. I am careful to always *cuidar* [take care] of my spirits so that I never *pegar fogo* [catch fire]. If I do, it is not their fault.” Implicit in Nazaré’s explanation is that if she does *pegar fogo*, it is because there is a valid reason for the *demanda* against her. For this reason Nazaré, as well as many other *zeladores*, are careful to claim that they engage only in *demandas* that are defensive rather than offensive.

But like any battleground, the difference between an offensive and a defensive *demanda* is not so clear-cut in practice. As a result many Afro-Brazilian religious practitioners consider *demandas* (and *trabalhos feitos*, of which they are an example) the main arsenal in the practice known pejoratively as *quimbanda* or *macumba*, that is, black magic. Indeed discourse about *demandas*, like that about black magic more generally, is primarily a discourse of accusation; seldom did anyone I met actually acknowledge employing *exu* spirits for nefarious purposes. And yet while most *zeladores* are loath to admit that they would ever petition an *exu* or *pomba gira* spirit to harm someone, they are quick to accuse others of doing so. The appeal of these spirits thus is intimately linked

to their ambivalent qualities and their ability to retaliate against an adversary if petitioned to do so.

Discourse about *demandas*, as Negrão observed, is not only about interpersonal conflict; it also expresses the felt need for protection in a universe of hostile relationships ruled by competition and jealousy.¹⁶ Because they are continually confronted with the malicious works of unscrupulous others, a *zelador* must be ready to defend herself or her clients with a counteroffensive work of her own. As Nazaré explained to me, “I am not here to do *maldade* [evil] against anyone. I don’t think about doing evil. I think in this way: if there is someone trying to do evil against you, I am going to stop it. The person at fault is the person who started it. And because I am your *zelador*, your spiritual protector, I am not going to let anyone *te derruba* [knock you down]. I am going to protect you. If someone sends a *demanda* against you or one of my *filhos*, I am going to use my power to defend you.”

Nazaré’s comments illustrate a typical pattern: when practitioners talk about their own involvement in spiritual conflict, generally they portray it as a form of defense or protection against the mystical aggressions of others.¹⁷ Questions of good and evil are irrelevant; the issue is presented as one of legitimate defense. “When someone attacks you, you have to defend yourself,” Fábio affirmed. “You take that *demanda* and deflect it back to [its author].”

Even in situations that plausibly could be seen as acts of mystical aggression, when a client petitions a *trabalho* against a third party a *zelador* will take care to present it as a legitimate response to previous malevolence. For example, when I asked if she would execute a *demanda* against an enemy if a client asked her to, Nazaré replied, “I might. But first I would throw the *búzios* in order to know what type of *maldade* I am dealing with, if I can counteract it, if the spirits permit me. And if they permit it, I would do it. But I am not doing it for the sake of doing evil. If you said to me, ‘Look, I want to kill my enemy,’ I would not kill them because you asked me to, no. I would throw the *búzios* in order to see if the spirits say it is for me to kill [this enemy], or to keep him or her away from you, or what [kind of work] I can do. If the spirits permit me, I could do it because I am fighting on your behalf. But if I do it, half is my responsibility, half is yours. The two of us will carry the spiritual consequences [of this act]. You because you asked and me because I did it.”

Careful to establish that her actions in this hypothetical situation would be defensive and justified by the spirits, Nazaré concluded, “I don’t have the right to destroy someone if that person doesn’t deserve

it. If that person doesn't deserve it, there's nothing I, or my spirits, can do [to harm him]. But I do have the right to *derrubar* that person if they hurt you or one of my *filhos*."

Here Nazaré presented an ostensibly offensive *demanda* as righting the wrong of a previous *maldade* or evil act. As in most discussion about *demandas*, Nazaré took the defensive posture: her sole responsibility is to defend her *filhos*; she has the "right to harm" anyone who hurts them. If that person "doesn't deserve it," nothing that she or her spirits do will harm him.¹⁸ From this perspective, evil "is always interpreted as a perverse consequence of the practice of good because everything has its good side and its bad side such that the situations that involve exus are always contradictory."¹⁹ In these situations of *guerra mística* (spiritual warfare), where the difference between offensive and defensive is defined not by the action itself but by the perspective of those engaged in battle, only the *exu* spirits can play both sides.

Because they undo the evil done against an innocent victim and turn it back on the person who originally set it into motion, these protective or counteroffensive *demandas* are perceived as restoring a state of moral balance and justice. Since they focus on immediate justice in the here and now rather than justice deferred to some afterlife, Negrão argued that these mystical works represent an explicit rejection of the Christian ideal of turning the other cheek or loving one's enemy. Neither does the justice provided by *demandas* require the mediation of a state or judicial institution, but rather involves the active participation of the victim who, by reacting and activating a counterattack, assumes a decisive role in the process.²⁰

Protected by the vigilante justice of her protective *exu*, the author of the counterattack maintains that only the deserving will be harmed by her actions. The language of protection here provides a way for combatants to engage in mystical attacks while simultaneously claiming that they are not involved in black magic, and the emphasis on justice affirms that their actions are merely restoring the moral balance. It is just to protect oneself and punish evildoers, all the more so in a society where one of the biggest failures of the state has been its inability to provide justice for all of its citizens and to enforce the impartial rule of law.

Clearly the conventional ways that people talk about their own involvement with *exu* spirits serve to mystify the pursuit of socially suspect goals, whether for vengeance or personal gain at another's expense. Yet at a deeper level discourse about *demandas* also expresses practitioners' sense of inhabiting a world that has lost its moral compass, where the

institutional structures that ostensibly enforce moral order have been perverted, leaving the individual to fend for herself. Combating perceived evil by similarly “immoral” means, *demandas* reestablish moral boundaries in situations that their authors experience as wrong or unjust.²¹ Herein lies one source of the *exu* spirits’ appeal. As Nazaré once said to me, “If God is all good, only the devil can combat evil.”

MYSTICAL ATTACK AND MORAL INTERPRETATION

Among a population that seldom has enjoyed the rights that middle-class Americans take for granted, *exu*-authored *trabalhos* and *demandas* can be seen as a strategy of moral interpretation and action enacted through ritual. They reflect a moral imagination based on the daily experience of systematic inequality, in which powerfully ambivalent spirit entities can be induced to protect, defend, and otherwise carry out the wishes of their human supplicants. Where Brazilians favored with wealth or social position are able to use those privileges to overcome the particular obstacles that they face, devotees of *exu* and *pomba gira* spirits attempt to do the same through their exchanges with these amoral entities, appealing for protection from the malice of enemies and rivals and for fulfillment of clandestine desires.

At the same time *trabalhos* involving these entities are mercantile exchanges that reflect a capitalist mentality of maximizing self-interest in a competitive world. Contracted for specific works on a fee-for-service basis, *exu* spirits are participants in transactions that embody the logic of the marketplace and a model of spirit-human relations based on commodified exchanges with an alienated labor force.²² Indeed Afro-Brazilian practitioners often describe *exu* spirits using the terminology of one of the most alienated forms of labor yet devised: slavery. As the *escravos*, or slaves, of the *orixás*, *exus* carry out the services that these exalted personages will not.

According to my informants, although the *orixás* offer generalized protection and well-being, they do not actively intervene in the day-to-day affairs of their *serviteurs*. In a division of spiritual labor that I heard articulated frequently, *exu* spirits perform the “heavy” or “dirty” work from which their spiritual superiors are exempt. “The *orixá* doesn’t work in this sense [of performing specific tasks],” Nazaré explained. “Those who work are the slaves, the *exus*.” Another devotee described the differences between these two types of supernatural beings in this way: “For me, Pomba Gira is like an employee, a worker. She does the heavy

work, all the dangerous, dirty work that has to be done. Because the *orixás* are entities of light, they can't get involved with all of the *sujeira* [filth] that humans create, the treachery and malicious acts that result from jealousy. The *orixá* is positivity, goodness. But human beings are not always good, are they? So we need Pomba Gira, we need the *exus* to fight for us. And without them, we are nothing."

Within the larger field of Afro-Brazilian religions, and regardless of practitioners' personal attitude toward the *exu* spirits, there is widespread agreement that the *orixás* represent a domesticated form of supernatural power associated with publicly acceptable standards of conduct and propriety. Relations with them are characterized as morally beneficent and modeled on idealized notions of reciprocal exchange and familial obligation associated with the domain of the *casa*. The *exus*, by contrast, must be compensated for their services; relations with them are modeled on contract labor and the individualistic ethos of the street. Associated with covert or morally ambivalent desires, these entities represent an unruly form of supernatural power that must be coerced into productive relationships with human beings.

These different modalities of interaction between human and spiritual forces, which could be characterized as reciprocal and instrumental, are ideal types; the realities of participants' ongoing spiritual lives can rarely be divided into such exclusive categories. And yet to one degree or another, Afro-Brazilian practitioners share a vision that ranks these models and their corresponding spirit pantheons along a hierarchy of moral evaluation. As a result even though devotees enter into ritually mediated exchanges with both *orixás* and *exus* for pragmatic reasons, these interactions carry markedly different moral valences. One of the ways that this difference is made palpable is through strategies of spatial and ritual separation that segregate entities of the *casa* from those of the *rua*, requiring that altars to the *exus* be housed apart from those dedicated to the *orixás*, and ceremonies for each kept temporally separate.

The care that devotees take to separate, both conceptually and practically, their dealings with the *orixás* from those with *exu* spirits does not seem to be a result of the intrinsic qualities ascribed to these supernatural beings. *Orixás*, for example, can be as willful and punitive as *exus*, and I often heard devotees complaining of punishments visited upon them by disgruntled *orixás*. Rather, as Stephan Palmié observed of Afro-Cuban religions, the distinctions between these two categories of supernatural entity seem to be rooted in theories about the kind of relationships that human beings can establish with nonhuman agents.²³

They derive, in other words, from competing models for spirit-human relationships, each of which is structured around a different image of sociality that is invested with a specific moral valence.

These different images of sociality may be linked to specific historical conditions, an argument that Palmié advanced in the Cuban case. Here the association of *exu* spirits with “dirty” or morally ambiguous work and their proliferation as a distinct class of entities separate from, yet at least partially subordinated to, the *orixás* has led some scholars to associate them with the historical experience of industrialization that transformed urban centers like Rio in the first half of the twentieth century.²⁴ Indeed the available evidence suggests that the *povo da rua*, at least in their present form, consolidated in the first three decades of the twentieth century, a period that witnessed Brazil’s transformation from a slave-based, primarily agricultural economy to an economy based on wage labor, the establishment of a republican form of government, the development of the country’s first large-scale industries, rapid urbanization of the Southeast, and increasing rates of internal migration.

In his classic *The African Religions of Brazil* Roger Bastide argued that Brazil’s rapid modernization under Gétúlio Vargas was reflected in the emergence of Umbanda, a new modality of Afro-Brazilian religion that spoke to the experiences and aspirations of an urban, multiracial proletariat. According to Bastide, under the influence of Kardecist Spiritism the Yoruba trickster deity Exu was transformed into a phalanx of demon-like figures characterized as troublemaking “spirits of the shadows.”²⁵ Unlike the ancestral figures of the *orixás*, associated with West African royalty and the awesome forces of nature, these *exu* spirits were represented as working-class folk whose personalities exemplified urban street life. Thoroughly invested with the ambiguity associated with the working classes, whose work is both despised and necessary to produce wealth, the *povo da rua* were called upon to satisfy individual desires, for which they demanded payment in the form of their favorite commodities. For this reason Bastide associated them with *quimbanda*, which he described as a magical practice oriented toward “demonic powers.”²⁶

Rather than identify *exu* spirits with magic or some other illicit mode of engaging the supernatural that is qualitatively different from religion, as Bastide did, we also could see them as expressing a particular model of sociality rooted in the historical experience of industrialization and proletarianization and as a means of conceptualizing, objectifying, and practically engaging the occult flows of power and material wealth that

have accompanied Brazil's transformation from a largely agrarian nation to one of the world's largest capitalist economies.²⁷

Indeed the mercenary ethos ascribed to *exus* and their associated ritual works speaks to one of the central contradictions of the world within which contemporary devotees of these spirits find themselves. As Palmié observed, in the context of structural poverty and political repression, the image of the market as a meeting place of autonomous individuals is a cruel phantasm because it mystifies the hierarchical relations of the dominant and the dominated who must sell their labor for a vastly unequal rate of return—a phantasm that obscures the real, unequal social relations integral to capitalism.²⁸ The logic that governs devotees' interactions with *exu* spirits is the very same logic that governs exchange within modern capitalist economies: self-maximizing commercial exchange. And yet when it occurs through the agency of the supernatural and not through the naturalized magic of the “marketplace,” it is denounced as black magic, or *fetiçaria*, a word that has the same root as *fetishism*.²⁹

At the same time that work with *exu* spirits exemplifies a capitalist mode of envisioning and achieving material success, it also is an expression of a worldview that sees capitalism as a zero-sum game, where one person's profit results in another person's loss. In this sense *exus* speak to the alienating and amoral process by which labor becomes commodified and linked to a market economy based on exploitive social relations; within this system the benefits that accrue to some come at the cost of others, an exchange whose asymmetrical terms are concealed by the mechanism of monetized payment. And so even as these spirits work for humans, exerting their mystical powers for the benefit of their supplicants in exchange for payment of their favorite things, this is a dangerous interaction, for *exus* represent the amorality and avarice of the market. There is always the possibility that petitioners will be drawn into ever more predatory exchanges, or that the spirit will betray them, lured away by a higher bidder. As a Brazilian journalist reporting a story on Pomba Gira was advised, “If you don't do everything they ask exactly, they'll dig a hole and put you in it.”³⁰

While *demandas* and other exchanges with the *exu* spirits articulate a specific vision of the contemporary world and offer a means of manipulating the shadowy networks through which socially desired goods are believed to circulate, the system within which they operate is not, as many claim, lacking a moral framework. Umbandistas and other Afro-Brazilian practitioners share the conviction that the individual bears

responsibility for his or her actions. This is expressed by what is sometimes referred to in Umbanda as “the law of return,” which affirms that every act has consequences: malevolence begets malevolence, and one’s negative acts return upon one thrice over. Unlike Christianity, however, this is not a moral system regulated by universal injunctions, but an individualized, pragmatic morality that is contextual: an individual’s actions can be morally evaluated only on a case-by-case basis and within their larger context. For this reason a *demanda* can be at one and the same time a work of mystical attack and defense.

Even as dealings with the *exu* spirits draw on the semiotics of capitalist exchange, they also incorporate elements of an older symbolic system rooted in an agrarian culture. As I mentioned earlier, in addition to “payment” in the form of purchased goods that Pomba Gira or another *exu* spirit is offered in exchange for a specific work, a *zelador* also must feed these spirits regularly with animal sacrifices in order to ensure their continued efficacy. These sacrifices, or *matanças*, are described as perpetuating the flow of *axé*, life force or energy, whose circulation enables the spirits’ potency. Perhaps the most obvious reminder of the African roots of Afro-Brazilian religions, the rituals involved in any *matança* are private affairs seen as vital for the entire community’s well-being. By regularly feeding her *exus*, Nazaré believed, she fortified not only the spirits but also her own claims upon them, enabling her to deploy them in *trabalhos* on behalf of clients and family members. The interdependent character of this relationship, forcefully symbolized in rituals of feeding that recall the domestic realm of the *casa*, with its ties of family and nurture, reminds us that devotees’ interactions with *exu* spirits are not adequately captured by overly rigid conceptual schemas that oppose *casa* and *rua*, moral and immoral, or agrarian and capitalist models of social relations. Like the humans who cultivate them, *exu* spirits are complex characters, and relations with them are as heterogeneous as any other arena of human expression.

THE EVERYDAY TRAGIC

Trabalhos and other ritual works associated with the *exu* spirits draw on various spiritual traditions brought to Brazil by different African and European peoples and continually reconfigured to address the specific, pragmatic needs of individual clients.³¹ These multiple influences were apparent even in the simple *despacho* that Nazaré made for Margarida: palm oil and manioc flour are the main ingredients in a *padê*, or food

offering, for Exu, whose roots go back to West Africa. Other items, like the candles, derive from popular Catholic devotional practices. The cigarettes and wine represent the preferred consumer goods of these spirits of the street, recalling the debauchery of their previous lives on earth.

Like the Haitian *wanga* and other so-called magical works found in Afro-diasporan religions, *trabalhos* often include highly symbolic substances that refer to the particular situation at hand or its desired outcome. Some of these symbolic elements reflect the specific personalities and proclivities of the spirit for whom they are intended; others are believed to direct the spirit to produce a particular effect in the human world. The tying together of Severino and Margarida's pictures, for example, mimicked the work's desired result, and the various liquids (honey, *erva doce*, and coconut water) in which the pictures were submerged figuratively "sweetened" the relationship.

Although some would dismiss these practices as an ineffectual form of "sympathetic magic" predicated on the errant belief that like influences like, I prefer Karen McCarthy Brown's suggestion that such symbolic components are better understood as techniques that, in conjunction with repeated verbalization or visualization, help petitioners achieve clarity about their desires and focus their cognitive powers on the realization of these desires.³² Whatever outcomes such works produce lie less in their effect on a third party (however ardently desired) than in the transformations that they can catalyze in a client's perception of her situation.

Notwithstanding differences in the particular material forms that they take, *trabalhos* in general can be seen as ritual means of addressing social forces and hidden desires—jealousy, rivalry, retribution, or ambition—whose occult operations are believed to affect individual well-being. By distilling complex social processes into comprehensible human motives, these works constitute a focal point in which their creators concretize painful or distressing sentiments, permitting them to be recognized, addressed, and potentially relieved through ritual and the manipulation of highly symbolic material objects.

Trabalhos involving Pomba Gira speak principally to what Robert Orsi once referred to as "the everyday tragic": the ordinary struggles, disappointments, and personal dramas that shape life as it is experienced moment to moment.³³ Religious engagement with the everyday tragic, he pointed out, typically is seen as the province of women or other socially marginalized groups. As a result it has been dismissed as superstition,

magic, or “folk” practice—excluded, in other words, as something peripheral to or other than “real” religion. And yet if we want to understand the various ways that human beings engage with transcendent powers that they take to be more powerful than themselves, we need to develop ways of accounting for these practices that don’t stigmatize certain practices while reifying others. We also need to pay attention to the larger relations of power within which these practices are embedded. As Randall Styers observed, accusations of magic typically function as markers of social difference that marginalize the efforts of socially subordinate or “deviant” actors to obtain or exert power while masking the forms of control exercised by the dominant classes.³⁴

From this perspective it is significant that *exus* are characterized as socially deviant others who embody qualities at odds with a more dominant vision of social order; they are unpredictable, ungovernable entities who are said to lack self-control, morality, and any sense of civic virtue. It is precisely these characteristics that account for their efficaciousness, according to devotees. To use the language of social theory, the way that *exu* spirits are conceived, narrated, and performed reflects a subaltern consciousness that is deeply implicated within a more dominant cosmological vision and moral vocabulary at the same time that it is fundamentally at odds with it. The skills associated with these spirits represent both the underside of a modernity based on predatory capitalism and an attempt to harness its occult flows.

Imaged as ruthless free agents who work for anyone who pays them, *exu* spirits appeal primarily to individuals who are systematically disadvantaged within the various social hierarchies that structure access to valued social resources in Brazil. Many of those drawn to these entities are housewives like Margarida and Nazaré, women whose husbands’ extramarital activities threaten not only their households but their statuses as *donas-de-casa*. Such male behavior strikes at the heart of a woman’s social identity and sense of self. In the working-class neighborhoods where I conducted my research, these and other gender conflicts are the most common problems brought to Pomba Gira.

Several weeks after Molambo’s sacrifice I contacted Margarida to find out the results of her *trabalho de amarração*. She reported no dramatic changes in her marriage, but she believed that things had begun to settle down. Severino was spending more time at home and paying more attention to her, developments that she attributed to the positive effects of the *trabalho*. In the course of our conversation Margarida also expressed dissatisfaction with Nazaré, whose attempts to draw her client

more deeply into the *terreiro*'s communal life by demanding her presence at biweekly rituals were quickly exhausting Margarida's gratitude.

Although I didn't know it at the time, that conversation was to be our last; for the remainder of my time in Brazil I didn't see or speak to Margarida again. It seemed that she preferred to keep the terms of her relationship with Nazaré focused on specific transactions, even as Nazaré herself endeavored to extend it, transforming Margarida from a client into something closer to a *filho-de-santo*. This is a common strategy among *zeladores* that I discuss more fully in the next chapter.

Balancing Human and Spirit Worlds

Pomba gira swayed, swayed.
Swayed but didn't fall.

Pomba gira balançou, balançou.
Balançou mas não caiu.

—*Ponto cantado* collected during the author's research

Pomba Gira is an indomitable woman. No one can contain fire, no one can contain her as well. Because Pomba Gira is a woman of fire, you see?

—Cristiane Amaral de Barros, "Iemanjá e Pomba-Gira: Imagens do feminino na Umbanda"

TO BALANCE WITHOUT FALLING

As both Margarida's and Nazaré's stories indicate, the desires and aspirations that motivate women to seek Pomba Gira's assistance with a specific problem in their life are deeply human, indeed banal in their very ordinari-ness. For both of these women, Pomba Gira offered not only supernatural assistance, but a means to negotiate prevailing conventions of gender, sexuality, and female agency that prescribe for women a subordinate role in relationship to men, limit female power to the domestic sphere, and stigmatize female sexuality while permitting men a range of sexual outlets. Although the phenomenon of Pomba Gira does not challenge the public foundations of this gendered arrangement of power, it does offer devotees a set of socially recognized resources with which to challenge its strictures within the limited context of their own lives.

Yet the alternatives that Pomba Gira opens up are neither unambiguous nor straightforward. Working with Pomba Gira may introduce or exacerbate conflicts that cannot be resolved within the terms of this spirit's particular logic. Neither is it necessarily the case that invoking the figure of Pomba Gira can successfully resolve gender discord, particularly when this involves entrenched social norms that encourage male violence and female quiescence. Rather than offer some form of definitive conclusion to the previous chapters, this final chapter traces the ebb and flow of gains and losses, problems and solutions that Nazaré encountered as a result of her work with Pomba Gira. I consider several episodes that, although minor or peripheral to the narrative that I recounted in Nazaré's spiritual biography, nonetheless deepen and extend it. Together with the preceding chapters, these stories address the question of why so many women like Nazaré—working-class inhabitants of the urban periphery of Rio de Janeiro, the vast majority of them staid housewives and mothers—claim to cede their bodies routinely to that rogue's gallery of prostitutes, cabaret girls, gypsies, and *malandros* that constitute the *povo da rua*.

Clearly one important aspect has to do with the license or autonomy that Pomba Gira makes possible for her devotees. This is particularly evident in two spheres: the sphere of male-female relations and the economic sphere. Thus it is not coincidental that Pomba Gira is said to specialize in romantic and financial problems. But these spirits do not work for free; there is always a trade-off, whether measured in terms of the luxury that the spirits favor or in other kinds of concessions. Working with these spirits—that is, mediating the world of the spirits with that of humans—means juggling the demands and the limits of each.

The term *balançar* frequently is used to describe this dynamic state of balancing the sometimes competing claims of the spirit and human worlds.¹ *Balançar* also may be translated as the act of swaying or weighing choices, and it implies both an active state of oscillating energy and a sense of measured strategy. A *ponto cantado* dedicated to Pomba Gira puts it this way: *Pomba gira balançou, balançou. Balançou mas não caiu* (Pomba Gira swayed, swayed. Swayed but didn't fall). Like most *pon-tos cantados*, this short phrase combines a highly condensed set of images and referents and can be read on more than one level. At the most superficial level, it refers to the distinctive swaying of the body that heralds possession, colloquially described as *cair no santo* (to fall in the

saint or spirit). Pomba Gira swayed, but didn't fall; that is, the person in whom she attempted to manifest swayed but did not fall into trance. In other words, the claims of the human world prevailed over those of the spirit world.

On a deeper level, it can also be interpreted to refer to the protective action of Pomba Gira who, in defending her devotees from the treachery of the human world, sways but ultimately does not permit malice to befall them. In this reading it is the spirit world that prevails over the malice authored by humans. In both readings the verb *balançar* is associated with conflict, a swaying between two potential courses. These readings are not mutually exclusive, however, and in fact may convey a notion of *balançar* that is overly systematized, for when the Afro-Brazilian practitioners I met used the term it was precisely to communicate an interchange between spiritual and human worlds that was open to multiple interpretations. Nazaré often used it to mean something akin to a state of active protection that is both offensive and defensive, a state necessary for well-being in world marked by treachery and scarcity.

As the final line of the *ponto cantado* cited above suggests, the aim is to balance without falling, to exploit the resources of both the human and the spirit worlds simultaneously in order to maximize health, wealth, and well-being and to minimize suffering. This is the delicate dance of survival, and it depends on a *zelador's* ability to creatively negotiate competing demands and obligations to the best of her ability. The logic of *balançando* is that one must be both flexible and firm, defensive and offensive, oscillating between different strategies as the situation warrants.

In some senses Nazaré's life story is an example of *balançando*, fluctuating between periods in which her identity as a *zelador* took greater precedence and periods in which her identity as a wife and mother was foremost, moving in and out of these roles in response to events in her life. Although she does not separate these various subject positions in her self-presentation—and neither should we—nevertheless we can note that each of these roles demands the presentation of a different face to the world: whereas the *zelador* is an aggressive and savvy spiritual entrepreneur, moving confidently through public space in the course of healing people, the *dona-de-casa* presides over a more limited, domestic realm. By being able to exploit the resources and benefits of each role Nazaré has been able to support herself through the various trials of a problematic marriage and periods of great financial uncertainty and to raise her

children. In all these tasks she credits the spirits, for it is they that have enabled her to be *equilibrada*, that is, balanced.

It is useful to consider the dynamic process of *balançar* in more detail, asking at what points appeals to the spirits can be employed successfully to resolve particular human dilemmas and at what point they fail or become counterproductive and must be supplemented by other sorts of survival strategies, other types of interventions or resolutions. In the following sections I examine the license and the limits of Nazaré's work with Pomba Gira in the circumstances of her marriage, in her relationship with an important client, and in her relationship with a fellow *zelador* with whom she shared a brief but intense interlude.

CONJUGAL DYNAMICS

We have seen the utility of Nazaré's appeals to Pomba Gira in the context of her marriage at several points in the previous chapters. In Nazaré's spirit narratives, for example, the loyalty and protection of Maria Molambo served as a constant counterpoint to the treachery Nazaré associated with Nilmar's philandering. It was this very dialectic of treachery and protection that drove the narrative progression in the story of Molambo's final vengeance, suggesting not only how discourse about *exu* spirits concretizes the jealousies and passions, desires and reprisals of the human world, but how appeals to Pomba Gira may facilitate a reorganization of roles within the marital relationship.

Although the spirits are profoundly implicated in the dramas of human lives, narratives about them do more than simply project human behavior and activities onto the supernatural realm. We can understand the flagrancy of Nilmar's philandering, expressed in incredible tales such as that I have titled "Molambo and the Maid," not necessarily as an accurate representation of factual events but as a dramatization of the structural instability Nazaré felt in her role as Nilmar's wife. In this example and others like it, the spirit narrative exteriorized the anxieties and uncertainties of the husband-wife relationship, a relationship that is structured in terms of asymmetrical gender norms that permit the husband multiple sexual partners while requiring the wife's fidelity. It is therefore not a coincidence that the spirit protagonist in these tales was Pomba Gira, the antithesis of the docile wife, conjured up to intervene on a scorned wife's behalf.

Nazaré's chronicle of her nascent relations with the spirit world implies that the very trials and troubles of married life precipitated a chain

of events that set her on the path to becoming a *zelador*. In her retrospective accounts the pressures of marriage, her ambivalent feelings about being a wife and mother, and her intense doubts about her husband's fidelity were intimately related to a series of behavioral disturbances that would eventually be diagnosed as possession episodes.² It was because the belief in spiritual powers is widely shared in Brazil that Nazaré could eventually transform these trials and troubles in such a way as to dramatically redefine the gendered terms of the marriage itself, becoming not just a wife but a wife and a *zelador*.

I have argued that this spiritual vocation both established and legitimated for Nazaré a world that did not correspond to dominant norms, particularly conventions of womanhood, as well as a moral language and ritual repertory with which to articulate these alternative meanings. As a result Nazaré's work with Pomba Gira was therapeutic not just in the sense of enabling her to act out repressed emotions and desires, but in reconfiguring her relations with her husband and enabling her to establish a sphere of influence not limited to her immediate family. Through Pomba Gira she became not just Nilmar's wife, but a wife of the spirits; not just a mother, but a mother of the saints.³

But this did not occur without struggle. Nilmar's testimony indicated that Nazaré's ever-increasing religious obligations required her to spend a great deal of time away from home, a factor that further exacerbated the tensions between them. The difficulties in their marriage, although changed, had not been (and could not be) resolved entirely through appeal to the spirits. In fact Nilmar particularly resented the constant demands of Nazaré's *filhos* and clients, which disrupted the family's life and intruded on his own. Early on in my fieldwork Nazaré's relationship with Seu Zé became the focal point for much of Nilmar's dissatisfactions, as Seu Zé began not only to monopolize his wife's time and attention, but to impinge on his own.

From this perspective Nazaré's relationship with Pomba Gira, while ameliorating certain tensions that emerged in the context of her marriage, also contributed to and created others that then required a different set of ameliorating strategies. Although Nazaré's assumption of the *zelador* role gave her considerably more power and autonomy within her marriage, it did not abolish entirely the constraints that she faced as a wife; Nilmar did not simply acquiesce quietly to the will of the spirits. Rather Nazaré was placed in a position of continually negotiating the demands made on her as a wife with demands made on her as a *zelador*. *Balançando* is never a one-time transaction, but an ongoing process.

A closer examination of Nazaré's relationship with Seu Zé provides some insight into this process. It also illuminates the economic dimension of Nazaré's spirit work, a dimension that heretofore has not been fully addressed. In the next section I provide a brief overview of the conventions that govern ritual work in most Afro-Brazilian religions, followed by an analysis of the *zelador*-client relationship. This provides the setting for an examination of Nazaré's relationship with Seu Zé, whose initial promise of financial autonomy ended in near disaster, eventually prompting Nazaré to reconcile with Nilmar. Here the resources of the spirit world could not resolve tensions that emerged with her client, ultimately compelling Nazaré to employ a different survival strategy.

THE ECONOMICS OF AFRO-BRAZILIAN RELIGIONS: THE IDEAL OF RECIPROCITY

Until she had established herself as a spiritual healer, Nazaré, like most housewives, did not work outside of the home. She depicted this situation as deriving not from her own preference, but from Nilmar, who, in her characterization, thought that if she worked outside the home "men would see [her] and their passions would be aroused." As a housewife Nazaré was financially dependent on her husband, and though she insisted that Nilmar had been a good husband in the sense of providing for her and their children, she also complained on more than one occasion that he routinely spent his money on other women, a grievance that seemed to suggest deeper frustrations with this arrangement.

As a *zelador*, however, Nazaré earned her own money. Indeed after Nilmar lost his job it was her income that largely supported their household, supplemented by Nazaré's other small-scale endeavors of peddling homemade food items on the street. Like most who earn a living through their work with the spirits, the bulk of Nazaré's income was derived not from the regular members of her house, the *filhos-de-santo*, but from clients who petitioned her for an array of ritual works.⁴ Because this income was often sporadic, the maintenance and extension of her clientele base was an important facet of Nazaré's spiritual work, and she lost no opportunity to advertise her spiritual services whenever possible.

Despite the fact that a client in effect purchases the ritual expertise and spiritual services of a *zelador*, the relationship between them is not that of a typical buyer and seller. Rather, like most relationships in the

Afro-Brazilian spirit world, it is structured around the ideal of reciprocity. Although Nazaré and *zeladores* like her often charge a fee for their spiritual works, the expectation is that, in addition to the fee, the client will reciprocate the *zelador* to a degree commensurate with the benefits that he or she has gained as a result of a successful *trabalho*. In return for her provision of spiritual services—which, by their nature, are difficult to quantify—the *zelador* expects financial and material compensation in the form of gifts. The fee itself is understood as recompense for the *zelador*'s time and skill and not necessarily as reflective of the actual value of the service rendered, which is determined by the benefit that the client accrues. In other words, the ideal of reciprocity mandates that the beneficiary of a spiritual service recompense the *zelador* who rendered the service a value equivalent to that which he or she obtained as a result. But the contextual and ambiguous nature of value in these cases means that the way is always open for one side to feel that the desired state of reciprocity has not been achieved. This instability is made more acute by the reluctance of most *zeladores* to specify an exchange value for their services.

The goal, however, is not so much to achieve an equivalent trade as to establish a relationship of mutual obligation in which reciprocity takes form as a continual flow rather than a one-time transaction. Here it is instructive to compare the *zelador*-client relationship with that of the *zelador-filho* relationship. This latter is structured less as a contractual relationship based on the provision of services than as a hierarchical relationship based on the *filho*'s submission to the spiritual authority of the *zelador*, dramatically forged and symbolized in initiation. In return for this submission and the labor power that comes with it, the *zelador* offers her spiritual guidance and healing services. This affiliation is coded as that of mother (or father) and child, *mãe-de-santo* and *filho-de-santo*, suggesting a lifelong bond of dependence and obligation as well as hierarchy and submission.

By contrast, in the case of a client the ideal of reciprocity is mediated less through a hierarchical model than a contractual one, implying a relatively equal status between the client and the *zelador*. As an Umbanda leader explained to one researcher, clients “[come and go] of their own free will,” that is, they are not bound to the *zelador* by ties of submission or obligation.⁵ Thus although the expectation of mutual reciprocity is similar in both relationships, the client stands in a position of greater autonomy and relative power in comparison to the *filho-de-santo*. Some of

this has to do with the fact that the client reciprocates with material resources while the *filho* reciprocates with his or her labor and submission. In the context of the urban periphery, material resources often have more value to a *zelador* than labor power.⁶

Despite the ostensible structure of reciprocity, it is not uncommon in these relationships for the respective parties to try to transform the reciprocal dynamic into an accumulative one in which he or she is the beneficiary. Because a particular client can be an important source of income, a *zelador* may seek to prolong this relationship and thereby maximize her gains. For instance, she may seek to satisfy the client's demand just enough to demonstrate success but not enough to resolve the problem definitively; alternatively, she may try to amplify her authority by implicating the client in an ever greater cycle of ritual obligations. Correspondingly a client may seek to extract the most benefit for the least investment or to maximize his or her own authority over the *zelador*. Here the case of Seu Zé is instructive.

CLIENT OR PATRON: RECIPROCITY VERSUS ACCUMULATION

I first encountered Seu Zé, a drag performer well-known in Rio's *travesti* (transvestite) community, on my initial visit to Nazaré's *terreiro*, and the dynamics of their relationship dominated much of the first year of my fieldwork. Throughout that year they were virtually inseparable, and when not in each other's company were in constant communication by telephone, much to Nilmar's displeasure. However, because the relationship was conducted under the auspices of the spirit world, there were few compelling arguments that Nilmar could make to prevent this state of affairs, for as a *zelador* Nazaré had a spiritual obligation to assist her clients. And unlike other of her spiritual obligations, this one brought immediate and concrete benefits of a primarily (although not exclusively) material nature, a point that Nazaré used to counter Nilmar's grumbling.

But Seu Zé was not a typical client. He appeared to occupy an anomalous position somewhere in between client, important personage, and *filho-de-santo*. Unlike most clients but like a *filho-de-santo*, he was expected to attend all of the ritual ceremonies held at Nazaré's *terreiro*, both public and private. But unlike a *filho-de-santo*, he was exempt from the considerable amount of work that prefaced each event, for like a client, his ties centered not on the communal religious life of the *terreiro* but

on Nazaré herself. At ceremonies he conducted himself like an important personage, conspicuously commanding the labor power of the other *filhos*, constantly sending one or another to refill his drink or to fetch him a snack or a cigarette from the local kiosk. His position in the community, as I was to learn, was somewhat unusual and derived from the fact that he had become not just an important client but a kind of patron. This transformation from client to patron would have significant implications for the structure of reciprocity.

In a series of interviews that I conducted with Seu Zé, the broad outlines of how this state of affairs had come about emerged. Like most of Nazaré's clients, he had heard about her powerful *pomba gira* spirits by word of mouth and had subsequently sought her spiritual intervention in a court case that had lingered unresolved for several years. Apparently there was a substantial sum at stake: the payoff on a lawsuit that had been hung up in the famously Kafka-esque Brazilian legal bureaucracy for years, and that, once resolved, would enable him to continue the lifestyle to which he had become accustomed.

As was her custom, Nazaré solicited Maria Molambo and Maria Padilha on this client's behalf, performing a series of *trabalhos* over the course of two years before the case was finally resolved in the client's favor. As a result Seu Zé had come into a significant sum of money, and in return had shared some of this largesse with Nazaré. These gifts consisted of material goods, including a car, as well as financial contributions to the *terreiro* and to that year's annual parties devoted to Maria Molambo and Maria Padilha. Seeking to cement his ties to her, Nazaré had made him an honorary "child of the house," one who commanded a great deal of her time and attention, for after the financial problem was resolved successfully Seu Zé proved to have a constant array of other problems requiring an assortment of spiritual works.⁷ As time went on, this state of affairs attracted not only Nilmar's displeasure, but that of Nazaré's other *filhos-de-santo*, sowing seeds of dissent that, in conjunction with other grievances, silently took root and spread.

When not in each other's company, Nazaré and Seu Zé talked at least once and, more often, several times a day. At Seu Zé's insistence, Nazaré began to accompany him to the various parties, performances, and events that make up the social life of a locally prominent Brazilian drag queen, not a typical facet of the *zelador*-client relationship, which usually is restricted to the matter for which the client has sought the *zelador*'s services. Even I got drawn into the fray at one point, accompanying Seu Zé and a small group of his followers to the Miss Gay Brazil

contest of 2000,⁸ where our host took the stage as a guest of honor and I was transformed into the group's official photographer. There it became clear to me that Nazaré, like me, had been co-opted into her client's entourage, which included a hunky boyfriend, a driver, a manicurist, and assorted hangers-on. But while my experience was limited to that one outing, Nazaré had been far more thoroughly integrated into Seu Zé's social network not only as a species of spiritual advisor but as a conspicuous sign of his spiritual protection. By always appearing with Nazaré at his side, Seu Zé enhanced his status and conveyed an image of having access to ambiguous spiritual powers.

For his part, Nilmar complained that Nazaré was neglecting her own family for a *traveca* (a pejorative term for *travesti*).⁹ In fact given the gender norms that I outlined in chapter 4, it is doubtful that Nilmar would have permitted his wife to spend so much time away from home with a man who was not transgendered, who presumably could not be considered a sexual rival and therefore a threat to his wife's fidelity. But because this client was paying for Nazaré's services in matters that appeared to require her constant ritual attention, she made herself available despite Nilmar's protests. This arrangement was quite lucrative, a factor that undoubtedly offset the disruptions that the relationship had begun to provoke in her home life. It appeared that the economic autonomy that Nazaré's relationship with Seu Zé proffered counterbalanced Nilmar's objections.

But this ostensible economic autonomy brought its own set of demands, as Seu Zé had become less a client than a patron. Aware of the shift in their relationship, Nazaré continually sought to present it in such a way that she appeared to be the authority figure, taking care to emphasize how much Seu Zé depended on her. From the outside it seemed that Seu Zé and Nazaré were involved in a competition for hierarchical supremacy, each party trying to reframe the relationship in the terms that granted him or her greater prominence, prestige, and authority. What had begun as a relationship of client and *zelador* became an increasingly complicated power struggle as each endeavored to implicate the other in a network of ties centering on themselves; while Nazaré attempted to make Seu Zé a *filho-de-santo*, Seu Zé attempted to insert Nazaré into his own network of advisors, assistants, and hangers-on.

It is not surprising that the relationship ended in mutual recriminations, as each struggled to extract benefits both tangible and intangible from the other. While Nazaré endeavored to maximize her material gains

and thereby increase her independence from Nilmar, Seu Zé endeavored to augment his prestige and daunt his enemies in the competitive world of drag performers. To put the matter in other terms, each attempted to transform the relational mechanism of reciprocity into one of accumulation in which they were the chief beneficiary, and ultimately the relationship could not be sustained. Significantly each charged the other with exploitation, that is, the improper accumulation of benefits at the other's expense. The beginning of the end came in the events surrounding the preparations for that year's festivities in honor of Maria Padilha.

THE LIMITS OF RECIPROCITY: THE *FESTA* OF MARIA PADILHA

In return for Maria Padilha's assistance in resolving his court case, Seu Zé had underwritten her annual gala *feira* that year. In true drag queen style, he had seen that every detail of the party was lavishly over-the-top, from the fresh rose petals that were showered upon Padilha to the red velvet cape studded with black sequins in the form of crossed tridents that he commissioned for her grand entrance.¹⁰ Because Padilha often is said to be a blonde with blue eyes, he had taken Nazaré to his own hairdresser for blonde hair extensions, an event that consumed the better part of a day and a sum greater than the monthly salary of many Brazilians.¹¹ First Nazaré's dark hair had to be bleached so that it would match the extensions, long hanks of human hair that were meticulously tied to small sections of her real hair with thread. While this was being done, Seu Zé's manicurist worked on her finger- and toenails, applying long plasticene fingernails, painting them bright red, and then gluing on glittery embellishments of rhinestones. The end result was a creature that bore less resemblance to Nazaré than to the drag queen who had orchestrated and underwritten the transformation, an effect that seemed to offer visual proof of the shift that had taken place in Nazaré's position.

Nazaré had taken the opportunity during her day-long visit to the salon to tend to her own interests. She had lost no time in apprising the other salon patrons of the event for which she was most painstakingly being prepared, as well as the sequence of events, including Padilha's favorable intervention in the client's court case, that had led up to it. She was successful in piquing the interest of one woman, who made arrangements for a divination session the following week. *Zeladores* are always on the lookout for potential recruits, and any social occasion

holds the possibility of yielding new clients or even *filhos*. A salon in chic Copacabana represented for Nazaré a rare chance to attract people from outside of the Zona Norte, and she spared nothing toward that end, extolling at considerable length the powers of her spirits and her own skill as a spiritual healer.

As the day of Padilha's *feira* approached, Nazaré's *barracão* underwent a series of dramatic transformations funded by Seu Zé. The entire building was repainted and other major repairs were undertaken, requiring the services of assorted plumbers, bricklayers, and carpenters. A new set of furniture for the *barracão* was delivered, and, in a signal display of sumptuary extravagance, on the afternoon of the *feira* a delivery truck arrived in front of the building and disgorged dozens of flower arrangements, to the amazement of a small crowd that had gathered outside to watch. Befitting the guest of honor, the flowers were all red roses. These were placed around the perimeter of the room and affixed to the walls, the room fairly bursting with their fragrant blooms. It was a somewhat incongruous scene of extravagance in what otherwise was a quite humble environment of whitewashed walls and makeshift plumbing.

During the last-minute preparations for Padilha's big night differences in Nazaré's and Seu Zé's respective notions of reciprocity surfaced when gathering thunderclouds threatened to wash out part of the evening's festivities, an after-ceremony barbecue that was to take place in the driveway. Convinced that the rain would ruin Padilha's party, Nazaré asked Seu Zé to arrange for a tent to shelter the driveway, a request that he denied. In protesting that he already had disbursed a lavish sum, he further offended Nazaré.¹² Barely containing her fury, she took me aside to hiss that Padilha had spared nothing in resolving the client's financial problems, and yet in return would receive miserliness. Seu Zé fumed that he was being exploited. The ideal of reciprocity had been compromised, and trepidation spread quickly as house members anticipated Padilha's wrath. Hours later, as the guests began arriving, tensions were still high. Yet by evening's end, and despite a light rain, the *feira* was judged a great success. As dawn was breaking I spotted Nazaré and Seu Zé happily toasting one another. Perhaps, had a subsequent incident not deepened it, the rift that would eventually end their relationship could have been healed.

But that was not to be the case. Some weeks later Seu Zé passed Nazaré a bad check, against which she had paid off a number of debts before discovering that her client's account was insolvent. A series of

acrimonious exchanges around the topic sealed the breach, with each accusing the other of exploitation. Offended by Nazaré's manner, Seu Zé refused (or was unable) to make good on the check, and as a result Nazaré's telephone, checking, and credit card accounts were terminated. Reflecting on these events some time later Nazaré speculated that the beginning of the end had come not at Padilha's party, but when she, bowing to Nilmar's pressure, had refused to accompany Seu Zé to one of his drag performances.

No amount of spiritual power could resolve this unfortunate denouement. The client who once seemed to promise Nazaré's financial independence had in fact left her deeply in debt. As she described it, "He was the bomb that blew up everything. . . . If wasn't for him, my name would be clean. I wouldn't be asking for favors. Favors we always need. But I wouldn't be needing so many as now. I would have my checkbook in hand, you understand? I could even be without money, but I could go to a store and write a check and pay it off in installments. I can't even do that. I don't have anywhere to go, I don't have anyone to help me. With my hands full of obligations, children to care for, business to care for, a *barracão* to care for—my life, I don't know where it is going. Many problems. Too much treachery." Not long afterward several other *filhos-de-santo* departed, complaining of gossip in the community. The following year, unable to maintain a sufficient base of clientele to meet her financial needs, Nazaré opened Na e Ni, her *birosca* with Nilmar.

Perhaps not surprisingly Maria Molambo had a different take on things. In the course of a conversation with the spirit, whom Nazaré had agreed to summon for the purpose of an interview, Molambo told me that Nazaré's troubles were her own fault. "If my *menina* had less of a big heart she would have a full house, she wouldn't be without a *barracão*, she would be living a good life," the spirit assured me in between drags on her cigarette. "Why? The heart brings treachery. Her heart, excuse the expression but I am going to say it, fucks her over. Because she thinks with her heart. People come to her and she doesn't charge them what needs to be charged and she gets fucked. This is the only error of my *menina*. Because if she thought about doing things the right way [here she rubbed her fingers together in a gesture signaling money], she would have things in hand. . . . But you will see, she will grow. Now she is down. Now she is using little of her heart. I, Maria Molambo, I am diminishing her heart so that she grows. So she doesn't remain in this shit that she is in. Because she is in the shit, young lady. She thought that she had

everything and she has nothing. But it was she who was the stupid one, it wasn't Maria Molambo who was stupid."

This lengthy monologue framed Nazaré's inability to maintain a functioning *barração* as a lesson from Molambo: the spirit is "diminishing her heart" so that she "grows" and begins to act not from the heart but from the head. Nazaré is "in the shit" because she does not charge clients adequately for her services, and they take advantage of her as a result. This "stupidity" is not Maria Molambo's doing, but the result of Nazaré's own error in trusting clients like Seu Zé. However wittingly sent, this message from the spirit absolves Molambo of responsibility for Nazaré's current difficulties as a *zelador* even as it recodes them as the spirit's punishment.

Nazaré's relationship with Seu Zé underlines the fact that although a client may hold out the promise of financial gain, this gain often comes at the cost of other forms of autonomy. Because the only ties between a client and a *zelador* rest on the provision of spiritual services, the relationship depends on maintaining reciprocity. The case of Seu Zé further suggests that the limits of the *zelador*-client relationship are reached at the point when the ethic of accumulation exceeds the ethic of reciprocity, with mutual accusations of a breach likely to result. Indeed such a relationship can endure only as long as each side feels that an equilibrium of benefits has been established. Here the economic autonomy that Nazaré's spiritual work made possible was circumscribed by the terms of the *zelador*-client relationship, a relationship that ultimately could not be sustained as each party struggled to transform the dynamic of reciprocity into one of accumulation.

Taking the analysis further, we may observe that Nazaré's relationship with Seu Zé was conducted initially within the terms and conventions of the spirit world, an arena in which she held a position of authority. It exceeded those conventions when Seu Zé became a patron and drew Nazaré into his social network, an arena in which he held a position of authority. Once this happened the balance of power between them shifted. It is significant that Nazaré believed the dynamic between them had changed the first (and only) time that she, under pressure from Nilmar, refused to accompany Seu Zé to one of his social activities.¹³ The resulting tensions that this provoked in the relationship ultimately could not be resolved through appeal to the spirits. In the end Nazaré was compelled to adopt another strategy to ensure her survival, opening a *birosca* with Nilmar.

Balançar is an active process that involves drawing on multiple resources, weighing different strategies and playing one off against the other. It is a process in which the spirits may play an important role, although not always a determinative one. In the next section I examine a different example of the interplay between the human and the spirit world.

FORBIDDEN AFFECTION: THE CASE OF TRANCA RUA AND MARIA MOLAMBO

Several weeks before leaving Brazil in 2001 I made the acquaintance of Claudio, who had begun appearing with regularity at Nazaré's *barracão* for occasions both ritual and social. A fellow *zelador* and a colleague of Nazaré's who lived on the other side of Acari, they had known each other for about ten years. The ostensible reason for his suddenly frequent presence revolved around some trouble that Nazaré was having with her youngest son, whom she had recently caught en flagrante with a male friend. Although Geraldo's homosexuality appeared to be a fact obvious to—if not overtly acknowledged by—all, Nazaré was greatly disturbed by this incident and interpreted it as a sign that Geraldo needed to be initiated immediately. I suspected that Nazaré's unexpressed hope was that this would allow him to express his feminine side in a more socially condoned manner, since the participation of young gay males in Afro-Brazilian religions is widely acknowledged.¹⁴ The situation was confirmed in her mind several days later, when Geraldo was suddenly possessed by a succession of restive spirits who battered his body back and forth, crashing it into the walls and floor. As a result Geraldo was secluded in the *roncô* and Claudio summoned to assist with the initiation.¹⁵

Although I had not witnessed this unexpected possession, when I arrived at the *barracão* the following day Geraldo was so stiff that he could barely bend his legs. He confirmed that he had *bolou no santo* (been taken by the spirits) the previous night but did not recall any further details. Two braided raffia bands had been placed around his upper arms, and he was dressed in loose-fitting white, the standard initiatory garb. Before I could learn more Claudio entered the *barracão* and motioned Geraldo back into the dark confines of the *roncô*. Nazaré, who had been sitting on the short flight of steps leading from the *barracão* to the entrance hall, relayed to me the events that had culminated in Geraldo's hurried seclusion. Claudio, Nazaré confided to me, would exert

a firm hand over Geraldo. I could not help but wonder if Nazaré's unexpressed hope was that Claudio's strong masculine presence would correct any wayward tendencies on the part of his young charge.

As if overseeing a hastily arranged initiation was not stressful enough, Maria Molambo's annual *feira* was less than seven days away, and for the past several weeks Nazaré had been scrambling to make the necessary arrangements. That year the situation with Geraldo along with the ongoing financial problems that had been the legacy of Seu Zé added immeasurably to Nazaré's anxiety, for if the party was not to Molambo's liking it was sure to bode ill for all concerned. In the days leading up to the ritual festivities the frenzy was such that at one point I counted more than twenty people engaged in numerous tasks around the building. Even Geraldo's initiation appeared to have been truncated, for a mere three days after he entered the *roncô* he emerged and rejoined the daily routine as if nothing had changed. When I remarked on this to Nazaré, she informed me that he had undergone an initial stage and would complete the initiation at a later time. However, Geraldo did not seem to be observing any of the taboos that typically circumscribe the daily life of a recent initiate: avoiding certain foods, wearing white clothing, covering his head. Claudio, his duties temporarily completed, continued to appear at the *barracão* daily, often staying long into the night. I started to suspect that his abrupt advent into the life of the center was due to factors beyond the immediate need to initiate Geraldo.

These other factors began to suggest themselves as the day of Molambo's *feira* grew ever closer. The first hint came one afternoon as Nazaré and I sat talking on the steps while we awaited Claudio, who was to drive us to the market to purchase supplies for Molambo's sacrifice. In between her cigarettes Nazaré leaned over and whispered that Claudio was *apaixonado por ela*, that is, infatuated with her. He wouldn't leave her alone, she reported, and further, people had begun talking. In response to my quizzical look she asserted her disinterest: "I don't need [a man], I don't need someone else who I have to take care of, what I need is sincere friendship. Sincere friendship. That is my problem." After another pause for a fresh cigarette she added another tidbit: Aurelio, sometime drummer for the house and another acquaintance of long standing, was also in love with her. "They are in love with me but I am not interested. Why do I need another problem? I have enough problems." At this last thought she harrumphed and stared off into the distance. Without further conversation Claudio arrived and we squeezed into his battered car for the bumpy trip to the market.

Apparently a state of infatuation explained why Claudio was a constant fixture at the *barracão* despite the fact that Geraldo was no longer secluded and the initiatory process seemed to have been aborted by all concerned, for reasons that were never made completely clear to me. In fact Claudio was involved in nearly all of the extensive preparations that preceded Molambo's *feira*, chauffeuring Nazaré and me as we purchased the various items required. He even helped the *filhas-de-santo* decorate the *barracão* for the public *feira*, not a task that men customarily perform.

Because Claudio had become such a regular presence, I decided to interview him about how he had come to know Nazaré. In the course of the interview he told me that his *exu* spirit, Tranca Rua, had married Nazaré's Maria Molambo in a ceremony some time previously. In response to my query as to how that was possible he explained, "In reality, they already are husband and wife. So we performed a ceremony, a pact, you see?" When I asked him and Nazaré to explain the details, each demurred, saying that they didn't know how to explain it, for they had not been conscious at the time. To Claudio I observed that since Molambo was reputed to have seven husbands, Tranca Rua was merely one among many. In response he laughed and nodded his head in agreement. In truth, at that time I had not heard any stories about Maria Molambo and Tranca Rua being married, although I later came across a *ponto cantado* referencing a romantic relationship between these two entities.¹⁶ Nevertheless Claudio's comments did seem to explain the scene that unfolded at Maria Molambo's *feira* two days later.

After all of the worrying and scrambling, the *feira* proceeded without a snag. The *barracão* had been decorated simply but attractively with palm leaves affixed to the walls and a vase of red gladiolas and roses in the center of the room, nothing like the previous year, when Seu Zé had financed a lavish makeover, but festive nonetheless. Two tables at the rear of the room held the alcohol that would be consumed by the various spirits, the *lembranças* (remembrances, or small gifts) that would be distributed to special guests (in this case small pots of purple violets and rose-shaped candles), as well as three dolls dressed as Molambo. By ten in the evening the room had begun to fill with participants and spectators, and more waited on the street outside, drinking beer and waiting for the signal from the drums that would begin the ceremony.

As usual the first part of the evening was dedicated to the *orixás*, and the assembled *filhos* danced the choreography associated with each *orixá* and sang the required three songs for each. Participants, audience

members, and assorted well-wishers were packed cheek to sweaty cheek around the perimeter of the room. Only the space of the dance floor seemed to hold a breath of air, as the bodies of the possessed swirled round and round. Like most of the *festas* at Nazaré's *barracão*, the part of the evening devoted to the *orixás* seemed a subdued preface to the real action: the arrival of the *exu* spirits.

After a short break Nazaré turned on the red light, and the second part of the evening was under way. Heeding the insistent beat of the drums and the songs of welcome, Molambo arrived with her customary flourish and was escorted from the room to be dressed in her new gown, given to her by an admirer. Some time later she emerged again, resplendent in red and gold brocade, her neck and wrists adorned with gold jewelry, gold dangles twinkling at her ears. Holding a gold-tipped chalice in one hand, from which she drank her wine laced with rose petals, and a cigarette holder in the other, she welcomed the assembled guests one by one. The drums continued to pound out their greetings, and the *filhos* sang lustily "Good evening, good evening, Molambo we bid you good evening" as Molambo swirled around the room, swaying her hips to the rhythm.

Soon after Molambo's arrival Claudio was possessed by his Tranca Rua. After a top hat and cigar had been provided for him, he grabbed Molambo's hand and led her in several songs. To my surprise Tranca Rua continued to clasp Molambo's hand as he sang, looking almost tenderly at her, while she beamed back at him. I had never seen such an intimate display in the context of a possession ceremony and recalled Nazaré's comment that she and Claudio had been the subject of pernicious gossip in the community. Whether or not their respective *exus* were married it was an unusual scene of undisguised affection, that, although appropriate for newlyweds, was quite unusual for two entities known more for lecherous behavior than tender devotion. Seeing them together like that, it came as little surprise that others were speculating on the exact nature of the relationship between Claudio and Nazaré.¹⁷

After several hours of energetic song and dance the evening ended with the songs of farewell that send the possessing spirits back to their abode. This brief ritual signaled the close of the religious part of the night's ceremony and the beginning of more general revelry as audience members joined participants in more dancing, this time to a samba beat, and more drink. The barbecued meat of the chickens and goats that had been sacrificed in Molambo's honor several days earlier was served to all. Appearing dazed and exhausted, Nazaré and Claudio seemed oblivious

to what had transpired earlier. No longer Maria Molambo and Tranca Rua, the impassioned looks that they had exchanged earlier had been replaced by an air of cordial affability.

I left the country shortly thereafter, and when I returned a year later Claudio seemed a distant memory. Upon questioning, Nazaré maintained that Claudio was just an old friend who had helped her out in a bind. Yet the intensity of their brief time together that previous year and the evident tenderness that had played upon their faces as, in the guise of the *exu* spirits, they had sung verses of praise and greeting to one another suggested a depth of feeling perhaps too complex to be acknowledged outside of the world of the spirits, a world unconstrained by the niceties of human conventions.

This brief encounter, although suggestive, should not be taken as conclusive. Nazaré never admitted to me that anything untoward had transpired. Nonetheless the loving scene that played out in the guise of the spirits highlights the connection of the *exu* spirits with the affairs of the heart. Even further it suggests how these spirits may fulfill needs that can otherwise not be met without social sanction, that is, needs that cannot be wholly satisfied within the norms and mores of the human world. At the age of forty-nine Nazaré was still a vigorous woman and certainly no prude. But she could not openly take a lover without serious damage to her honor and reputation as a wife. And notwithstanding her professed satisfaction with Nilmar as a husband, whatever romance she had once enjoyed in that relationship had long been superseded by other emotions. Lover of seven men and married to none, Maria Molambo suffered no such limitations on her reputation or on her autonomy.

Here we see how a problem in the human world—lack of romance or affection—is resolved within the spirit realm by the marriage of Maria Molambo and Tranca Rua. Yet the potentially corrosive gossip that surrounded this relationship indicates the trade-offs that any such spirit-mediated solution enjoins. The scene that unfolded between Molambo and Tranca Rua that evening did not go without notice, undoubtedly confirming for many what they had already suspected. And gossip, if unchecked, can be damaging to both a *zelador*'s credibility and her ability to attract and maintain adherents.

Any possession performance is subject to the critique of participants and audience members, most often expressed in the form of gossip. Acceptance of the validity of spirits does not mean automatic acceptance of the validity of a particular possession event. Particularly in a small community like Nazaré's a dense network of interrelations links individual

members, who often possess intimate knowledge of the parties involved, as well as the particularities and proclivities of individual spirits. Because possession is a socially constructed event, any breach of the behavioral codes that regulate it in a given community is likely to generate speculation. And any behavior that contradicts these codes is grounds for suspicion and gossip, if not actual claims of fraudulence.

As a result any discourse or performance of possession includes intense scrutiny of the human relations within which it is embedded and which it manifests. Thus speculation about the hidden motives of the possessed person and those surrounding her (who could benefit, who could be jealous, who could be wreaking vengeance) accompanies any possession event.¹⁸ The speculation is pernicious, as gossip about or accusations of fraudulence constitute one way for individuals to challenge the validity of others' claims to spiritual power or to consolidate their own. This is an important subterranean dynamic in spirit possession religions in general, and intragroup conflicts often are expressed in accusations and counteraccusations of false possession. Because I left Brazil soon after these events took place I do not know the effect, if any, of this gossip on Nazaré's *terreiro* or on her work as a *zelador*. However, the changed circumstances in which I found her a year later suggest that whatever gratification she had gained from the situation may have been short-lived.

CONCLUSION

Among most residents of the urban periphery the struggle to obtain and defend a measure of dignity, autonomy, power, and prestige is a daily one. For many, like Nazaré, the spirits are a constant feature of these efforts, enabling a reordering of identity and relationships that may take place on several levels at once. As others who have studied spirit possession cults have observed, through the guise of the spirits not only may issues of selfhood and identity be addressed, but structures of domination may be challenged, alternative constellations of gender, power, and knowledge may be articulated, attention may be garnered, complaints phrased and otherwise unacceptable desires expressed.¹⁹

Not insignificantly the spirits also lend a sense of excitement, drama, beauty, and glamour, ornamenting the otherwise circumscribed lives of the housewives, maids, factory workers, itinerant vendors, and taxi drivers whose bodies they animate and whose dreams they haunt. Amid the everyday poverty of the *favela*, which can be measured not only in

economic terms but as a dearth of opportunity that reaches across the generations, stretching back into the most distant memory and ahead into an uncertain future, the incredible richness of the human imagination enables psychic survival.

Indeed in the periodic ceremonies in which the spirits are called down to commune with their human supplicants the explicit goal is to both display and produce *fartura*, abundance. The success of such ceremonies rests on the criterion of *fartura*: abundance as communicated through the beauty of the decorations, the flowers, the quantity of elaborately prepared dishes dedicated to the spirits, the sumptuousness of the ritual costumes, the number of spirits and spectators who are drawn together and the enjoyment that is shared among them—a *fartura* that both celebrates and reflects the abundance that the spirits, when properly feted, bring to the human world. If only for the time that a ceremony lasts, participants may enjoy a spectacle of spiritual and material prosperity in which the cares of the everyday world may be temporarily forgotten, secure that whatever these cares may be, the resources of the spirit world can be called upon to intervene.

But Nazaré's case also suggests something that has not been fully or convincingly addressed in the literature on Afro-Brazilian possession cults: the quotidian utility of Pomba Gira discourse and practice in negotiating cross-cutting systems of honor, propriety, morality, sexuality, and gender in the modern, urban environment. We have seen at close range the ongoing *balanço* that has so profoundly shaped Nazaré's spiritual path, as she has struggled—not always successfully, not always consistently—against various forces in the quest to achieve a life of dignity with a minimum of economic security, well-being, happiness, and pleasure in an environment in which none of these things can be taken for granted. Within the limitations of her situation Nazaré has been able to achieve many of these things through her work with the spirits.

I have focused on the dynamics of this negotiation largely in terms of the limitations, as Nazaré experienced them, of marriage and the accompanying structure of gender roles and expectations governed by the husband-wife relationship. In the early years of her marriage the spirits enabled Nazaré to deflect responsibility and therefore blame (and perhaps consciousness as well) for periods of disruptive behavior, expressions perhaps of her frustrations with Nilmar and the stresses of mothering three young children.

As time went on her growing mastery of the spirits enabled Nazaré to assert a new identity as a *zelador*, a subject position that in many

ways was an extension of her wifely role outside of the bounds of her own small family. Here again it was the spirits who bore responsibility for this transformation; it was, she claimed, the *pomba gira* Maria Molambo who first opened a little room for consultations with clients, and as her clientele grew, a full-fledged center was born. This enterprise provided an independent income as well as a growing sense of importance and responsibility apart from her role as Nilmar's wife, a role that was a constant source of insecurity and humiliation for Nazaré. In her narratives it was the spirits who continually defended her against and finally avenged her for these humiliations, permitting a reordering of the relationship such that today she and Nilmar live in mutual accord not as husband and wife but as brother and sister.

Although Nazaré may have achieved some balance in her relationship with Nilmar, like many of those who work with the spirits her life continues to be economically precarious. Relations with clients represent the main source of income for a *zelador*, and as the case of Seu Zé dramatically demonstrates these relations are best managed when they remain within the sphere of the *zelador's* authority. The success of such a relationship depends on the *zelador's* ability to maintain a balance between reciprocity and accumulation such that both parties are satisfied with the arrangement, a balance that in this case Nazaré was unable to strike. As a result in the two years that I lived in Brazil she went from high to low, from independent spiritual entrepreneur to an entrepreneur of a quite different sort, unable to attract sufficient participants to maintain a functioning *terreiro*, *dona-de-casa* once more. But unfailingly, through both successes and failures, Nazaré has held on to the faith that as long as she serves the spirits, they will serve her in return.

Finally, Nazaré's story also suggests how desires that could not otherwise be expressed without social sanction can be articulated with and through the spirits. Caught in a loveless relationship with Nilmar and yet unwilling to abandon it altogether, Nazaré was placed in a situation in which she was unable to express her affection for another without compromising her hard-earned reputation as a wife. The marriage of Maria Molambo and Tranca Rua represented the possibility of simultaneously preserving this reputation and fulfilling a need that could not otherwise be met. Yet here again the trade-off for such an affair can be measured in the potentially damaging gossip of skeptics not persuaded of the disinterestedness of the human actors in whose bodies these two spirits were incarnated.

Stories and ritual practices invoking the spirits are more than a way of explaining misfortune and illness or claiming power and authority through recourse to what in Brazil are widely shared notions of mystical power. Indeed stories about the spirits also can function as a moral discourse, an oblique commentary on human foibles and desires that may be employed for various ends: to express inchoate feelings or forbidden desires, critique or contest the behavior of another, or claim moral rectitude or personal honor. Unlike other kinds of moral discourse, however, stories about Pomba Gira are extremely ambivalent and their use is not straightforward.

Although most practitioners are reticent to admit that they would ever petition an *exu* spirit for a negative purpose, they are also equally ready to attribute this act to someone else. Similarly although most (if not all) *zeladores* vigorously deny that they employ the *exu* spirits for any purpose that could be construed as harmful or malicious, it is not uncommon for them to insist with equal vehemence that they are quite capable of doing so under the right circumstances. Given the ambivalent status of these spirits, it makes sense that participants and *zeladores* attempt to assert their own moral rectitude by distancing themselves from their malevolent connotations while simultaneously acknowledging—indeed underlining—their nefarious potential as wielded by others or, under strategic circumstances, by themselves.

Invoking *exu* spirits may be employed to provoke fear by suggesting that one is trafficking in what are widely considered to be unpredictable and malevolent forces, thus bolstering one's reputation and power. Yet at the same time it is rare for a *macumbeira* to admit that she would self-consciously use such power to augment her prestige or position. This points to the fact that the nefarious potential of the *exu* spirits is both productive and counterproductive: though it may produce fear and respect, it does so at the risk of moral condemnation. Thus the potential fear that these spirits inspire must be weighed against dominant codes of morality and invoked as circumstances warrant either to bolster one's reputation or assail another's.

Exploiting the ambivalent nature of the spirits is critical for the success or failure of a *zelador's* reputation—and thus is critical for the accumulation of religious and social capital, especially in an environment in which access to other forms of capital (through education, employment, personal connections, etc.) is limited. But it also can be critical for the more prosaic task of negotiating the daily violence waged in a

thousand small ways against the home, family, honor, reputation, or self-respect of those marginalized social actors who constitute the majority of Pomba Gira's devotees. For women in particular, these attacks center on the home and the intimate relationships of the domestic sphere, and thus touch on the characteristic domain of Pomba Gira. In its mundane details Nazaré's story suggests why this spirit is so important for those who inhabit the margins of their society.

Notes

CHAPTER ONE

1. Author's transcription and translation of interview with Nilmar, Rio de Janeiro, 2001.

2. I capitalize the term when speaking of Pomba Gira as an archetypal character and use the lowercase to refer to individualized manifestations of this larger archetype.

3. In his dissertation, "Blood, Money, and Fame," Brian Brazeal developed the notion of spiritual work in Afro-Brazilian religions as a mode of value production. He analyzed practitioners' interactions with different kinds of spiritual entities as exemplifying distinct models of production that address different social and individual needs, but that are intimately related to one another.

4. The verb *trabalhar* describes various types of human-spirit interchanges. Reginaldo Prandi defined it in the following way: "The concept of 'trabalho,' that is, a magical practice that interferes in the world, is central in umbanda and in the construction of its entities" ("Pombagira dos Candomblés e Umbandas," 97). *Trabalhos* are also those ritual processes and assemblages through which such spirit intervention is accomplished.

5. I discuss the term *macumba* later in this chapter. *Quimbanda*, according to scholars, is related to two Bantu-language words, *kimbanda* (Kimbundu) and *jinbandaa* (Kikingo), that, in their original Central African context, referred to spiritual powers or the person who has contact with those powers. In a study of slavery in Rio de Janeiro, Mary Karasch defined *quimbanda* as a spirit medium or healer who communicates with the dissatisfied spirit who has afflicted a person with disease (*Slave Life in Rio de Janeiro*, 214). Working with Inquisition

trials and missionary records, James Sweet (*Recreating Africa*, 54–57) hypothesized that *kimbanda* referred to a discrete and powerful caste of religious specialists in seventeenth-century Central Africa who lived apart from society in bands and were associated with a variety of inversions (cross-dressing, walking on their hands). They exercised a variety of spiritual roles, from acting as spiritual arbiters in political and military decisions, to performing burial ceremonies and acts of *feitiçaria*, or witchcraft. Europeans described them as sodomites (because they cross-dressed) and *feiticeiros*. If Sweet is correct, *quimbanda* may have associations, at least linguistically, with *feitiçaria* and sexual or gender transgression, as Europeans understood these. This may account for *quimbanda*'s association in Brazil today with black magic, that is, nefarious acts that are believed to invert the moral and social order.

6. Because I discuss intimate details of my informants' lives, I have used pseudonyms throughout to protect their privacy.

7. Orsi, *Thank You St. Jude*, 210.

8. I conducted fieldwork in Rio from January 2000 to January 2002; in December 2004; from July through November 2006; and from July through August 2008.

9. Vincent Crapanzano first proposed that spirit possession can be productively understood as a type of social discourse or, in his terms, a "spirit idiom" ("Spirit Possession"). Janice Boddy, following Crapanzano, described possession as a particular kind of cultural idiom that is (1) based on consensually validated, ritually confirmed information; (2) conceptually removed from other primary idioms intrinsic to everyday practice; and (3) drawn upon collectively and individually to articulate certain problems and experiences of everyday life (*Wombs and Alien Spirits*, 137). See also Vincent Crapanzano, introduction to Crapanzano and Garrison. *Case Studies in Spirit Possession*, 1–39. For a critique of analyses of possession that conceptualize it as an idiom, see Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute*.

10. On spirit possession as a culturally sanctioned response to overdetermined gender roles, see Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits*. Karen McCarthy Brown discussed the interrelations of gender roles, inadequate love relationships, and economic pressures in *Mama Lola*. In "Spirits and Spouses" Michael Lambek analyzed spirit possession as a system of communication within conjugal relationships that, among other things, enables wives to exert certain pressures over their husbands. Although there are many similarities among female-dominated spirit possession traditions cross-culturally, my principal aim in this book is not to offer a comparative analysis but to situate Pomba Gira in her particular cultural and social context. In keeping with this commitment, my references to the vast literature on spirit possession are few. However, for those readers interested in pursuing cross-culturally relevant patterns, I have found the following works, in addition to those just cited, most helpful: Bourguignon, "Suffering and Healing"; Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute*; Crapanzano and Garrison, *Case Studies in Spirit Possession*; Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*; Boddy, "Spirits and Selves in Northern Sudan"; Kenyon, "The Case of the Butcher's Wife"; Youngsook Kim Harvey, "Possession Sickness and Women Shamans in Korea," in *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives in Non-Western Cultures*, ed. Nancy A. Falk

and Rita M. Gross (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), 41–52; Lerch, “An Explanation for the Predominance of Women in the Umbanda Cults of Porto Alegre, Brazil” and “Spirit Mediums in Umbanda Evangelizada of Porto Alegre, Brazil.”

11. By effeminate men I mean those males who for whatever reason cannot (or will not) fulfill the role of the dominant *macho*, sometimes referred to as the *homem de verdade* (real man). In my research I encountered no sociological studies of Pomba Gira devotees and very few studies of the figure of Pomba Gira. Stefania Capone made the clearest association between these spirits, gender, and sexuality in *La quête de l’Afrique dans le Candomblé*. Although not as explicit, these links are also suggested in Contins, “O caso da Pomba Gira”; Prandi, “Pombagira dos Candomblés e Umbandas e as faces inconfessadas do Brasil.” James Wafer’s ethnography *The Taste of Blood* provides a glimpse into the cultivation of Pomba Gira among effeminate males in the urban periphery of Bahia, and although Pomba Gira was not the focus of that work, his data support the connections that I have described.

12. Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists*, 18. Judith Butler developed a similar notion of the “constitutive outside” as “the excluded and illegible domain” that establishes the limits of any classificatory system (*Bodies That Matter*, xi).

13. Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists*, 20.

14. Here again the cross-cultural evidence suggests that possessing spirits often are represented as demanding entities who must be appeased, foreigners or others exempt from the local rules of politesse, or amoral figures expected to behave in ways that otherwise would be strongly censured. See, among others, Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits*, 165, 193, 209, 254, 273; Lambek, “Spirits and Spouses,” 319.

15. As Patrícia Birman observed in “Transas e transes.” See also Stefania Capone’s discussion of Pomba Gira in *La quête de l’Afrique dans le Candomblé*, 181–82.

16. Although Brazilian scholars working with both historical documents and ethnographic data have examined Umbanda and other eclectic forms of Afro-Brazilian religions from a variety of perspectives, there are no book-length works that examine these religions in the specific context of an individual’s life history, in the daily struggle for dignity and survival that marks life among poor and working-class inhabitants of urban centers. In *Kardecismo e Umbanda* Cândido Procópio Ferreira de Camargo offered a sociological portrait of Kardecism and Umbanda in São Paulo in the early 1960s, focusing on the doctrinal and ritual differences between what he saw as two poles of a “mediumistic continuum.” Employing a sociological approach and hundreds of interviews with Umbanda practitioners, Paula Montero examined the therapeutic aspects of Umbanda in *Da doença à desordem*. Liana Trindade employed a similar methodology to analyze various understandings of Exu in “Exu: Reinterpretações individualizados de um mito” and *Exu: Símbolo e função*. In *Guerra de orixá* Yvonne Maggie documented the dissolution of an Afro-Brazilian temple as a struggle waged through spiritual proxies. In a later work based on historical archives, *Medo de feitiço*, Maggie examined the efforts of the state and intellectual elites to combat the illicit healing practices of the masses, particularly those associated with Afro-Brazilian

practices. Diana Brown offered a sociological and historical portrait of Umbanda in “Umbanda and Class Relations in Brazil” and *Umbanda: Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil*. Lísias Nogueira Negrão detailed the historical development of Umbanda in São Paulo and surveys a range of beliefs, spirit entities, and practices in *Entre a cruz e a encruzilhada* and “Umbanda: Entre a cruz e a encruzilhada.” The ethnographically based work of Yvonne Maggie and Márcia Contins (“Gueto cultural ou a Umbanda como modo de vida”) and Patrícia Birman (*Fazer estilo criando gêneros*), all conducted in the urban periphery of Rio de Janeiro, suggests that religious practices emerge from and are integrated with the realities of life among marginalized populations.

17. This is true not only in the case of Brazil but for other Afro-diasporan sites in the Americas and the Caribbean. On similar processes in other locales of the African diaspora, see, among others, Ayorinde, “Writing Out Africa?”; Romberg, *Witchcraft and Welfare*; Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists*; Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods*.

18. For more in-depth discussion of this topic, see Skidmore, *Black into White*; Johnson, *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods*; Dantas, *Vovô nagô e papai branco*.

19. Although European immigration was encouraged, an 1890 decree prohibited the immigration of Asians and Africans except by special congressional approval, lest these populations impede the whitening process. (After 1907 the ethnic provision was dropped and Japanese settlers were granted entry, although as a columnist for the Rio daily wrote, “We are not very sympathetic to yellow immigration”; Skidmore, *Black into White*, 130.) According to Skidmore, the 1808 *Lei de Terras* (Law of the Lands) granted free land to European settlers, and in São Paulo the provincial government mounted a program to recruit and subsidize immigrant, primarily Italian, labor for commercial agriculture (138–39). Skidmore estimated that as of 1890, three million Europeans had settled in Brazil (45).

20. Over the course of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth the city was reconstructed in the shape of a “tropical Paris,” a simulacrum of European refinement meant to announce to the world the civilizing potential of the tropics. In social terms, this reconstruction meant not only the creation of spacious boulevards and central parks, but the destruction of the tenement housing and *cortiços* (slave quarters) inhabited by the lower classes, and the inhabitants’ removal to the outskirts of the city center. Among elites of the capital, the sentiment expressed by Afrânio Peixoto (1876–1947), a leading figure of the educational establishment, professor of medicine and law and later dean of the University of the Federal District, captures the critical importance of these transformations: “Before we can lay claim to a place in the world, we must prepare for such a role, exhibiting the decency and confidence of the civilized. Any sacrifice is small in pursuit of such an inspiration” (*Poeira da estrada*, 86 quoted in Skidmore, *Black into White*, 132). Paul C. Johnson also analyzes the reconstruction of Rio de Janeiro in terms of contemporary concerns about race, hygiene, and social progress (*Secrets*, 85–88).

21. See Johnson, *Secrets*; Maggie, *Medo do feitiço*.

22. At the same time, elites—high-ranking government officials, society ladies, politicians, lawyers, and so forth—seem to have clandestinely procured

Afro-Brazilian cult leaders for spiritual services precisely because of the magical powers attributed to them. In Rio de Janeiro in the early 1900s the journalist Paulo Barreto, writing under the pen name João do Rio, reported witnessing “high-society ladies” in secret consultations with black “sorcerers” (*As religiões no Rio*, 25–26). In the 1930s and 1940s Arthur Ramos, Edison Carneiro, and Ruth Landes similarly noted that politicians and high-ranking government officials were widely known to be clients of well-known cult leaders. Because of these relationships, well-connected Afro-Brazilian religious communities rarely suffered from police repression to the same degree as those lacking highly placed friends—a factor that may have contributed to the consolidation of the position of *ogan* (a largely honorary position often held by influential men) in cult houses. See Ramos, *O negro brasileiro*; Carneiro, *Ladinos e crioulos*; Landes, *The City of Women* and “A Woman Anthropologist in Brazil.” See also Costa Lima, “O candomblé da Bahia na década de trinta”; Bastide, *The African Religions of Brazil*, 131–32.

23. Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*, 183; Silverstein, “The Celebration of Our Lord of the Good End.”

24. For example, Rodrigues, *O animismo fetichista dos negros bahianos*; Ramos, *O negro brasileiro*; Carneiro, *Candomblés da Bahia*; Herskovits, “African Gods and Catholic Saints in New World Negro Belief,” *The Myth of the Negro Past*, and “The Southernmost Outpost of New World Africanisms”; Bastide, *O Candomblé da Bahia* and *The African Religions of Brazil*; Verger, *Notes sur le culte des orishá et vodoun à Bahia et à l’ancienne Côte des Esclaves* and *Orixás*.

25. Ramos, *O negro brasileiro*, 30.

26. See Brown, *Umbanda*; Dantas, *Vovô nagô*; Capone, *La quête de l’Afrique*; Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*.

27. Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*, 11. These intellectual debates include the well-known argument between Melville Herskovits and E. Franklin Frazier about the African legacy in the New World. See Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*; Frazier, “The Negro Family in Bahia, Brazil”; and their subsequent discussion in the August 1943 volume of the *American Sociological Review*: Herskovits, “The Negro in Bahia, Brazil”; Frazier, rejoinder, *American Sociological Review* 8, no. 4 (August 1943): 402–4.

In many ways the Herskovits-Frazier debate provided the generative framework that structured subsequent scholarship on African American cultures, at least in anthropology. For a critique of how it continues to set the parameters for anthropological discussions about the African diasporic cultural formations, see Yelvington, “The Anthropology of Afro-Latin America and the Caribbean.”

28. According to Pierre Verger, the term *Nagô* was used by slave traders to refer to slave cargo that departed for the New World from the Bight of Benin on the west coast of Africa. It appears to be derived from *Anago*, a Fon (Dahomey) term for Yoruba speakers (Verger, *Orixás*, 14). See also Omari, “Candomblé,” 137. In Cuba the Yoruba ethnic group was referred to as *Lucumí*, and to this day Afro-Cuban religious traditions that claim a Yoruba origin sometimes are referred to as *Lucumí*. J. Lorand Matory asserted that the term *Lucumí* derives from the Yoruba phrase *Olùkù mi* (“my friend”; *Black Atlantic Religion*, 302n2).

29. Nina Rodrigues was the first to make this claim, at the end of the nineteenth century. He is credited with initiating the ethnographic study of African-derived religions in Brazil and establishing the main themes that preoccupied subsequent scholars. In his pioneering studies of former slaves and their descendants in Bahia, Rodrigues argued that the superior religion of the Nagô, together with their numerical superiority, the wide diffusion of their language, and their ongoing trade relations with Lagos, made Nagô culture dominant in Bahia. As a result other ethnic groups adopted Nagô beliefs and religious practices. Inferior to the Nagô were a variety of “less advanced” tribal groups such as the Bantu, whose religion lacked a developed mythology and a hierarchical structure of authority and therefore was more prone to the degrading process of syncretism. See Rodrigues, *O animismo fetichista dos negros bahianos* and *Os Africanos no Brasil*, 25. In his work on Afro-Brazilian religions Rodrigues frequently cited the work of Col. A. B. Ellis, the commanding officer of the British West India Regiment in West Africa, particularly *The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa* (1894), and seems to have agreed with Ellis’s assessment that the Yoruba developed a more sophisticated civilization in comparison with other tribal groups in Africa. As Rodrigues noted, “The works of Colonel Ellis . . . permit us to differentiate the parts that together make up fetishistic practices in Brazil and, at the same time, to judge the modifications which they have experienced here” (*Os Africanos*, 216). Certainly Rodrigues’s knowledge of African religions was derived entirely from late nineteenth-century accounts of missionaries and colonial officials, particularly those of Colonel Ellis: “Actually, to judge by the authors that I was able to consult, the fetishism of the Bantus is much more simple and rudimentary than that of the blacks of West Africa” (*O animismo fetichista*, 163).

Against those who saw the bias toward Nagô religion as purely a scholarly artifact, J. Lorand Matory argued that the emphasis on the superiority of Nagô cultural forms over those of other African ethnic groups was primarily a product of what he termed the “Lagosian Cultural Renaissance” brought to Bahia with Afro-Brazilian travelers and merchants in the late nineteenth century. Centered in Lagos, this movement extolled the sophistication of Yoruba civilization over that of other ethnic groups, claims that were amplified and reproduced by white missionaries and British colonial officials for their own reasons. Continuing a long history of transatlantic circulation between Bahia and coastal West Africa, Afro-Brazilian priests, merchants, and travelers of the late nineteenth century brought these ideas to Brazil. Among other things, claims about Yoruba supremacy may have helped Afro-Brazilian merchants sell the religious goods they purchased in Africa to their Brazilian clientele, according to Matory. And because scholars who came to Bahia in the 1930s and later focused their studies on a small number of Nagôcentric communities and relied on a small network of informants, they reproduced this discourse of Nagô supremacy in their own accounts. Indeed Matory described Colonel Ellis’s *The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa*, much cited by Nina Rodrigues, as the “most influential work of the Lagosian Renaissance era” (*Black Atlantic Religion*, 63). See chapter 1 of Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*.

30. For example, many of those whose work has been influential in the scholarship on Afro-Brazilian religions, including Nina Rodrigues, Edison Carneiro, Arthur Ramos, Ruth Landes, Roger Bastide, and Pierre Verger, established close personal ties with particular Nagô Candomblé communities. A majority of these scholars underwent the initial stages of initiation or other rituals that marked their affiliation. For example, Rodrigues and Ramos served as *ogans* at Gantois (a largely honorary position reserved for influential male members of the community); Bastide performed the *lavagem do colar* (a ritual that establishes affiliation with a tutelary *orixá*, but that also indicates a commitment to the community in which the ritual was performed) at Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá; Verger was considered a *filho-de-santo* (initiate) at Opô Afonjá; and Carneiro may have served as an *ogan* there. (According to Landes, Carneiro was *ogan* at Opô Afonjá, but Dantas reported that Carneiro himself said that he was never confirmed as an *ogan*, but was disputed between Engenho Velho and Opô Afonjá.) For more discussion, see Dantas, *Vovô nagô*; Landes, *City of Women*; Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*.

Also of note is the fact that Engenho Velho (also known as Casa Branca), Gantois, and Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá are all sister communities that share a common lineage. As a consequence, much of the information on which these scholars based their work was drawn from a very small (and not very representative) circle of Afro-Brazilian religious centers located in Salvador, Bahia. Nevertheless there were a significant number of slaves speaking Bantu languages in Bahia, and in Brazil more generally. The significance of Bantu-derived traditions can be seen in the large number of Bantu words that have been assimilated into Brazilian Portuguese, in many cases replacing the Portuguese equivalent (e.g., *senzala*, slave quarters; *xingar*, to insult; *bunda*, buttocks; *dendê*, palm oil; *cachaça*, rum). See Castro, “A influência das línguas africanas no português brasileiro,” 6–7. So strong is the Bantu influence on Brazilian Portuguese that Castro credits “the Bantu black” as “the principal agent transforming the Portuguese language to its Brazilian form and diffusing it throughout Brazil under the colonial and slave regime” (8).

31. J. Lorand Matory offered his own critique of this, in *Black Atlantic Religion*, as did Beatriz Goís Dantas in *Vovô nagô e papai branco*. I discuss the historiography of Afro-Brazilian religions in greater detail in Hayes, “Macumba Has Invaded All Spheres.”

32. See Bastide, *The African Religions of Brazil*; Ramos, *O negro brasileiro*.

33. The term *low spiritism* appeared in the scholarly literature as a reference to eclectic or otherwise suspect practices. Emerson Giumbelli discussed the emergence of the category “low spiritism” in police reports and court documents beginning in the late 1920s in Rio de Janeiro, where it was used to denote “illegitimate” spiritual practices, that is, those that the authorities believed to be fraudulent or employed for nefarious purposes. See Giumbelli, *O cuidado dos mortos* and “O ‘baixo espiritismo’ e a história dos cultos mediúnicos.” See also Maggie, *Medo do feitiço*.

34. Ramos, *O negro brasileiro*, 144.

35. Although there have been scholars who saw a continuum where others perceived a hierarchy of “legitimate” and “illegitimate” spirit practices, these

accounts have not been as influential, particularly outside of Brazil. Cândido Prócopio Camargo's *Kardecismo e umbanda*, published in 1961, is a notable early account of São Paulo's spiritual heterogeneity. See also Negrão, *Entre a cruz e a encruzilhada*.

36. To signal pejorative uses of the term *macumba* I use the lowercase. When employing the term as my informants did, to refer to a shared universe of spiritual ideas and practices, I capitalize it.

37. Kardec, *O livro dos espíritos*. On the history of Kardecism and Spiritism in Brazil, see Hess, *Samba in the Night and Spirits and Scientists*; Damazio, *Da elite ao povo*; Giumbelli, *O cuidado dos mortos* and "Heresia, doença, crime ou religião." On Espiritismo as a cosmological and ritual system, see Cavalcanti, *O mundo invisível*.

38. The quote is from David Hess, who described this variety succinctly in *Spirits and Scientists*, 2–3.

39. See Hayes, "Black Magic and the Academy."

40. Cardoso, "Narrar o mundo," 317. Cardoso's explanation of macumba's semantic load merits reproduction here:

Macumba does not share the specific denominative dimension of "candomblé" or "umbanda," terms that convey the notion of a socially recognized identity, despite the enormous diversity [of practices denoted by these terms] encountered in ethnographic examples. Although "macumba" has fallen into disuse as a common analytical term in anthropology, it continues to appear frequently in the speech of ethnographic subjects, in a play of semantics, as a sign incapable of literally "naming" or constructing a positive identity. Macumba is, above all, a polysemic sign, saturated with contradictory significations, and negatively marked by an historical process of racialization that is more or less apparent. (339, fn. 4)

41. Because Exu is associated with communication, pathways, and places of interchange, each house or threshold may have its own guardian Exu. In many Candomblé communities Exu is recognized as an entity with multiple avatars or *qualidades* (qualities), each with a different name. One community that I visited in Rio maintained altars for a specialized Exu associated with the oracular process (Exu Baralonafá or Exu do Ifá), one charged with transporting messages (Exu Ojissebó), and one who was venerated as "owner of the pathways" (Exu Lonã), among others with similarly specialized functions. Members of the group also had their own personal Exu linking them with their ruling *orixá*. This Exu was represented in a special altar, called an *assentamento*, and regularly propitiated with offerings. For additional descriptions, see Prandi, "Exu"; Santos, *Os nagô e a morte*, 130.

42. According to some scholars, the associations made between the West African Exu and the Christian Devil were based not only on his reputation as an unpredictable trickster, but also on representations of Exu that depicted him with a large phallus. At the end of the nineteenth century Nina Rodrigues noted, "Exu is a phallic deity who, among our blacks, thanks to a Catholic education, is almost totally associated with the Devil" (*Africanos no Brasil*, 228). Roger Bastide reported that the oldest statues of Exu found in the Candomblé centers he studied in Bahia possessed a "very accentuated phallic character." Several sentences

later he added that this characteristic (which he read as representing carnality), along with his horns, accounted for the deity's syncretic identification in Brazil with the Devil (*Candomblé da Bahia*, 163).

43. On the historical emergence of Umbanda, see Brown, *Umbanda*; Ortiz, *A morte branca do feiticeiro negro*; Giumbelli, "Zélio de Moraes as as origens da Umbanda no Rio de Janeiro"; Bastide, *The African Religions of Brazil*. Umbanda practitioners themselves often emphasize the religion's origins in time immemorial, or millenarian civilizations like ancient India, claiming, for example, that the term *Umbanda* derives from the sacred Aum (or Om) in Hinduism. However, most scholars have dismissed these claims, which clearly reflect a desire to legitimize Umbanda to a larger public by linking it with ancient religions or minimizing its connections to sub-Saharan Africa. In terms of Umbanda's etymological origins, Mary Karasch proposed that the term itself is Kimbundu (a Bantu language from West Central Africa) in origin and refers to "the indigenous medical science of Angola" (*Slave Life in Rio*, 214 fn 1). For this derivation, Karasch cited Gerhard Kubik (*Angolan Traits in Black Music, Games and Dances of Brazil*, 25). The term *Umbanda* appears to be related to *quimbanda*, another Bantu term (Kikongo *kimbanda*; Kimbundu *quimbanda*). In the 1930s Arthur Ramos wrote that he "registered the terms *quimbanda* and its derivatives *umbanda* and *embanda* (from the same root *mbanda*) in the macumbas of Rio de Janeiro, but with their meanings already amplified. Umbanda can either be a *feiticeiro* or a sacerdote . . . or it can mean the place of macumba or the ritual process" (*O negro brasileiro*, 97–98). The term *mbanda*, according to James Sweet, means medicine man or spirit healer (*Recreating Africa*, 56).

44. In general Exu in Candomblé is considered an *orixá*—an ancestral, African divinity—and not the spirit of a former human being (as *exus* are described in Umbanda). One significant difference between Umbanda spirits like the *exus* and the *orixás* is that the former speak (and smoke and drink) when incarnated in their human hosts, whereas the latter do not. However, there also are Candomblé communities that recognize multiple forms of Exu and Pomba Gira that are far more similar to the Umbanda spirits than to the *orixás*. In Rio these communities tend to be denominated as Candomblé de Angola, that is, as pertaining to the Angola *nação* (nation). It is important to keep in mind that these and other classificatory labels do not necessarily refer to a discrete set of practices or beliefs originating among a particular cultural-linguistic group in Africa but to locally determined traditions that, in practice, overlap considerably.

45. In Candomblé *eguns* are ancestral spirits pertaining to a particular family or ritual lineage whose power can be invoked and controlled as a result of certain ritual procedures. The term also denotes generalized spirits of the dead. Both types of *eguns* are capable of afflicting human beings in various ways and are considered extremely dangerous. In general they are not cultivated through possession trance, but through periodic offerings and other rituals that keep them at bay. Because of the influence of Spiritism, Umbanda practitioners tend to understand *eguns* as troublesome low-level spirits who who must be exorcised.

46. These appear to be of more recent origin. According to Francisco Brumana and Elda Martinez, the first references to these spirit types in Umbanda

literature occurred in the late 1960s, coinciding “with the great migrations that from the 1960s onward concentrated in the big industrial cities” (*Spirits from the Margins*: 172 fn. 34, 172). Consistent with this hypothesis, their mythology is less well developed than that of *exus*, *preto velhos*, or *caboclos*, although their popularity seems to be growing. Others have seen the proliferation of distinct categories of spirit entities as indicative of Umbanda’s sensibility to significant sociological and socioeconomic developments within Brazilian society, particularly among subaltern populations. See Negrão, *Entre a cruz e a encruzilhada*; Concone, “Caboclos e Pretos-Velhos da Umbanda.”

47. Liana Trindade also observed this in her study of *exu* spirit beliefs (“Exu: Reinterpretações individualizadas de um mito,” 31).

48. Prandi, *Herdeiras do axé*, 163.

49. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, xiii.

50. Herzfeld, *Portrait of a Greek Imagination*, 1.

51. In this endeavor I have been influenced by Karen McCarthy Brown’s *Mama Lola* and Raquel Romberg’s *Witchcraft and Welfare*, two excellent studies of contemporary female spirit healers in which Afro-diasporan religious practice is shown as a dynamic mode of engagement with everyday life that makes appeals to a superhuman world but is firmly rooted in human realities.

52. Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, xxv.

53. For example, Orsi, “Everyday Miracles,” 7; Orsi, “Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live In?,” 172–74.

54. See Orsi, “Is the Study,” 172.

55. Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits*, 9, 274.

56. Because Portuguese words are either masculine or feminine, Nazaré usually referred to herself as a *zeladora*, employing the feminine ending. For the sake of consistency I have chosen to use the generic (masculine) *zelador* throughout the book since that is the more common form.

57. For more on the *orixás*, healing, and the use of herbs in Candomblé, see Voeks, *Sacred Leaves of Candomblé*.

58. A list of English-language works that address race in the contemporary context of urban Brazil includes Goldstein, *Laughter Out of Place*; Selka, *Religion and Politics*; Sheriff, *Dreaming Equality*; Sansone, *Blackness without Ethnicity*; Hanchard, *Racial Politics in Contemporary Brazil*; Burdick, *Blessed Anastácia*, “The Fall of a Black Prophet,” and “The Spirit of Rebel and Docile Slaves”; Fontaine, *Race, Class and Power in Brazil*.

59. In comparison with Pomba Gira, these spirits are far less developed as personas independent of Nazaré herself, and their corresponding roles in her life have been considerably smaller and more ephemeral.

60. I discuss several examples in Hayes, “Feiticeiras and Donas-de-Casa.”

61. Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits*, 136.

62. *Festa* (party) refers to ritual ceremonies in honor of a specific spirit entity or group of entities. For *orixás*, these *festas* take place on or near the feast day associated with their Catholic counterparts. For those centers that venerate *orixás*, the ritual year thus closely parallels that of the Catholic liturgical calendar. For *exu* spirits, *festas* occur annually either on or around the date of the spirit’s death or on the spirit’s “birthday” (the day of the year upon which the spirit was

first “seated,” that is, the day that its devotees undertook the ritual procedure of constructing an individual *assentamento* [literally “seating,” or altar] for it).

63. For example, I was present at various ceremonies and rituals that accompanied initiation, as well as other private events that were open only to members of the house, including the ritual sacrifices that preceded any large *feira*, annual ceremonial observances, group purifications, and individual *ebós* (ritual processes for various ends) and *boris* (literally, “feeding the head,” a form of ritual sacrifice of special foods offered to one’s patron *orixá*). I also observed several private divination sessions that Nazaré conducted for clients and participated in my own on three occasions.

64. Daphne Patai described similar experiences in her own fieldwork conducting interviews with working-class women, and her sensitive analysis of it helped me formulate my own understanding of narrative as an act of self-fashioning. See *Brazilian Women Speak*, introduction.

65. Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, 68.

66. Many authors have pointed to reciprocity as the central dynamic of African and Afro-diasporan religions: Karen McCarthy Brown, Rachel Harding, Roger Bastide, among others. I discuss notions of reciprocity between humans and spirits in chapters 2 and 5 and reciprocity between leaders and adherents in chapter 9.

67. See Orsi, “Everyday Miracles,” 8.

CHAPTER TWO

1. Jane Fernandes and Éden Nilo, “Maria Padilha é Pomba Gira,” *Correio da Bahia*, April 3, 2004, retrieved February 2007 from www.correiodabahia.com.br/2004/04/03/noticia.asp?link=not00090751.xml.

2. The literature on the subject of narrative and other forms of discourse is extensive, but the following works have most influenced my own thinking: Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*; Rosenwald and Ochberg, *Storied Lives*; Orsi, “He Keeps Me Going” and *Thank You St. Jude*; Barthes, *Mythologies*.

3.

Quando era pequinhinha
Ela foi deixada na porta do cabaré
Menina volta pra casa
Aqui não é pra criança
Aqui só entra mulher
Olha que eu não sou criança
Olha que eu sou mulher da rua.

Pomba Gira é a mulher de sete maridos
Não mexe com ela
Ela é um perigo.

Pontos cantados collected from author’s field research, Rio de Janeiro, 2000. For the last, see also the version cited in Prandi, “Pombagira dos Candomblés e Umbandas e as faces inconfessas do Brasil,” 96.

4. This is a variant that I sometimes heard. Prandi (“Pombagira,” 96) recounted a version that is quite similar in its basic outline, although richer in geographical

detail. His version appears to be derived from the writings of a popular Umbanda writer, Omolubá, whom he cited in a footnote: Babalorixá Omolubá, *Maria Molambo na sombra e na luz* (Rio de Janeiro: Pallas, 1990). Other variants may be found at www.terreirodeyansa.hpg.ig.com.br/mariamolam.htm (accessed July 2007); <http://flawinha.sites.uol.com.br/> (accessed July 2007).

5.

Mas que caminho tão escuro
Que vai passando aquela moça
Com seus farrapos de chita
Estalando osso por osso.
(Rio de Janeiro, 2000)

Zaydan Alkimin recorded a similar version of this *ponto cantado* in *O livro vermelho da Pomba Gira*, 69.

6.

Quem é essa moça
Que vem estalando osso por osso
É Maria Molambo
Que mora no fundo do poço.
(Rio de Janeiro, 2000)

7. Souza, *The Devil and the Land of the Holy Cross*, 95, 121, 147, 255. Among the varied magical formulas de Mello e Souza uncovered in Inquisitional records was the following *sortilege* to bind a lover: “I come to sit in this door stead, and I see not so and so, nor be there anyone to fetch him; go Barababas, go Satan, go Lucifer, go his wife, go Maria Padilha and all her company, and may all gather together and enter unto so and so’s house, and not let him eat, sleep, nor rest, save he enter my door, and all that I shall ask him, shall he wish to do and grant, and if this be done for me, I promise to give thee a table” (147). Compare this with the following prayer to Maria Padilha, from a contemporary online altar where those seeking the spirit’s intervention can post their petitionary prayers: “Beautiful Queen, I come to you with my heartfelt request that he returns passionately to me, loving me more and with enormous desire to be at my side . . . that his heart be full of love for me so that he asks me to come back to him, that the love he feels for me consumes his heart so that he sees me everywhere he goes, that he smells me everywhere he goes, and that he misses my face, body, kiss, embrace, and feels nothing but how much he misses me.” (retrieved May 5, 2007, from http://istoe.terra.com.br/planetadinamica/altar/site/lista_altar_pub2.asp?id_user=25333&cid_altar=53570).

8. The relationship between Donã Maria Padilla and King Pedro I of Castile (1334–69) was memorialized in medieval Spanish narrative poems called *romances viejos*. A collection of these was published in Castile around 1547 as the *Romancero general* (Capone, *La quête*, 112). The epic ballads recount Pedro’s murderous ways with rivals and family members alike; at the urging of his mistress, Maria de Padilla, he is depicted as murdering several family members and friends, in addition to imprisoning Blanca de Bourbon and later having her assassinated. The story of Pedro and Maria de Padilla seems to have captured

the imaginations of subsequent generations, for it was made into an opera entitled *Maria Padilla* by Donizetti (1841) and chronicled by Prosper Mérimée in his history of Don Pedro I (1843). Marylese Meyer reports that Donizetti's opera played in Rio at least once in 1856 (*Maria Padilha e toda sua quadrilha*, 155).

The figure of Maria Padilla again appeared as the "great gypsy queen" invoked in the spellcraft of the gypsy Carmen in Mérimée's novel *Carmen* (1847). A similar association between Maria Padilha (and *pomba giras* in general) and gypsies is also present in Umbanda, where spirits of gypsy women (*ciganas*) are sometimes classified as a particular *linha* (line) of *pomba giras*. There is also an entity named Pomba Gira Cigana who is depicted in stereotypical gypsy fashion, adorned with bangles and a colorful skirt.

9. Meyer, *Maria Padilha e toda sua quadrilha*. Meyer's conclusions seem to have found their way quickly into popular Umbanda literature. (At least one author, Maria Helena Farelli, presented data from Meyer's book as having been passed on to her by the spirit herself.) According to Farelli, Padilha told her:

I am white, not black like the orixás that I serve. I didn't come from Nigeria, I was born in Spain. I wasn't the queen, but I wore a crown; because of this I still wear a crown: it is my right. My first crown, made of gold, emeralds, rubies and opals, was given to me by my first love: the King Don Pedro I of Castile, he whose Spanish subjects named "The Cruel." I was the King's lover in the time when there were Moors and Jews there, around the 1300s. . . . I wasn't the queen; her name was Dona Blanca de Borbon, she came from France and was a big bore. It was me who the King loved. . . . I was the mistress of the master of the land of Andalusia. (*Os conjures de Maria Padilha*, 10)

10.

Vou contar uma lenda de uma pobre Maria
Que conheceu o luxo e a agonia
Vou contar a lenda de Maria Padilha
Que escondia a sedução sob a mantilha
Ela viveu no século XIV
cheio de magia, misticismo e fantasia
Ela nasceu na Espanha valorosa
Formosa e maravilhosa.

These are the first two stanzas of a poem that tells how the young Maria Padilha, after the death of her mother, became a courtesan and seduced King Pedro I away from Blanca de Bourbon. Retrieved November 15, 2007 from www.bocadoinferno.com/romepeige/lendas/maria.html.

11.

Foi bola de cristal que ela pediu
Foi bola de cristal que ela desejou
Foi lá no palácio real
Que a Padilha jogava carta de baralho e bola de cristal.
(Rio de Janeiro, 2000)

12. Although Protestant churches were established in Brazil as early as the 1920s, the number of conservative, evangelical churches expanded rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s, and again beginning in the 1990s. The 1991 census

indicated that Evangelicals constituted about 9 percent of the population, with Pentecostals accounting for over half of that figure. In 2000 Evangelicals accounted for approximately 15 percent of the population, 68 percent of whom were Pentecostal. See www.ibge.gov.br/home/estatistica/populacao/censo2000/populacao/religiao_Censo2000.pdf. For general census data, see www.ibge.gov.br. Using figures from the Brazilian census, the Pew Forum of Religion and Public Life reported that the number of Protestants increased by 2.6 percentage points from 1960 to 1980, and by 8.8 percentage points from 1980 to 2000, more than triple the rate of increase of the previous 20 years. See <http://pewforum.org/world-affairs/countries/?CountryID=29> (accessed October 2007).

13. On the *mulata* in the symbolic universe of Brazilian Carnival, see Richard Parker, *Bodies, Pleasures, and Passions*, 153–54. On the *mulata* as a construct of racialized femininity and signifier of national identity, see Pravaz, “Imagining Brazil.” In “Mulatas profissionais” Sonia Maria Giacomini discussed the characteristic attributes of the Brazilian *mulata* (namely, a beautiful face, *corpo violão* [figure-eight-shaped body], skill in dancing samba, high buttocks, sensuality, and an ability to seduce an audience) as evidenced in a program of courses for the “professional mulata” (a woman who earns a living as a dancer in theatrical shows featuring *mulatas*). The mother-daughter team of Angela Gilliam and Onik’a Gilliam wrote a fascinating essay about their own experiences with the *mulata* identity in Brazil and the shifting social meanings of class, race, and gender embedded within this figure (“Odyssey”). Of course the image of the mixed-race woman as the embodiment of feminine sensuality and a potent symbol of a *mestiço* nation is not unique to Brazil. Vera M. Kutzinski discussed nineteenth- and twentieth-century images of the *mulata* as a signifier of Cuban *mestizaje* in *Sugar’s Secrets*.

14. Often, but not always, Maria Padilha is portrayed as a blonde.

15. On race and Brazilian standards of beauty, see Rebhun, “Sexuality, Color, and Stigma among Northeast Brazilian Women”; Sheriff, *Dreaming Equality*; Burdick, *Blessed Anastácia*; Goldstein, *Laughter Out of Place*.

16. Retrieved June 10, 2008, from <http://br.answers.yahoo.com/questions/index?qid=20070427145330AABeW5J>.

17. I analyze cases of sexually inappropriate and other gender-aberrant behavior attributed to Pomba Gira as expressions of sociostructural tensions within the normative schema of gender in Hayes, “Feiticeiras and Donas-de-Casa.”

18.

A porta do inferno estremeceu
 O povo corre pra ver quem é
 Eu vi uma gargalhada na encruza
 É Pombagira, a mulher do Lucifer.
 (Prandi, “Pombagira,” 94)

19.

Padilha
 Soberana da estrada

Rainha de encruzilhada
Ela é mulher de Lucifer.
(Farelli, *Os conjures de Maria Padilha*, 12)

20. *Maria Molambo é rainha / Ganhou coroa de Lucifer* (Rio de Janeiro, 2000).
21.

Vai parar na sepultura
Não mexe com ela não
Que ela é ponte de agulha
Quem mexer com Maria Molambo
Vai parar na sepultura.
(Rio de Janeiro, 2000)

22.

Cemitério é praça linda
Mas ninguém quer passear
Maria Molambo mora lá
Mora lá, mora lá
Maria Molambo mora lá.
(Rio de Janeiro, 2000)

23. This close connection between female sexuality and death encapsulated in the figure of Pomba Gira has provided rich ground for Freudian-based analyses. The psychologist Monique Augras theorized that Pomba Gira developed as a manifestation of the erotic character of the West African mother goddess Yemanjá, whose more sensual aspects were repressed in the syncretistic Afro-Brazilian traditions of Candomblé and Umbanda. Whereas Yemanjá in Africa retained both her maternal and erotic associations, under the influence of Catholicism in Brazil the erotic was split from the maternal, and Pomba Gira came to represent the sublimated libidinal aspects of Yemanjá, now associated only with the life-giving aspects of maternal female sexuality. Thus while Yemanjá in Umbanda was associated with Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, the erotic and potentially destructive aspects of female sexuality were encapsulated in the figure of Pomba Gira, who “synthesized the most scandalous aspects that the free expression of female sexuality represented” in the eyes of a society dominated by patriarchal values (Augras, “De Iyá Mi a Pomba-Gira,” quote on 14).

24.

É meia moite
A lua se escondeu
Lá na encruzilhada
Dando sua gargalhada
A Pomba Gira apareceu.
(Rio de Janeiro, 2000)

25.

Pomba Gira do cemitério
E também da encruzilhada

Eu quero ver Pomba Gira

Eu quero ver a minha rainha lá na encruza.

(http://members.fortunecity.com/nossaumbanda1/pontos_pombagira.html, accessed August 2007).

26. In the opinion of Monique Augras:

There seems to be little doubt that the name of Pomba Gira results from a process of corruption that first transformed Bombonjira to Bombagira, then to Pomba Gira, becoming in this way words that made sense in Portuguese. Because “gira,” a word of Bantu origin (njila/njira, “direction, path,” according to Castro, 1983, 100) referring to the Portuguese *girar*, is, as we know, the circle ritual of umbanda. And “pomba,” in turn, in addition to meaning dove, also designates genital organs, male in the Northeast and female in the South. Even the name itself indicates ambiguity and sexuality. In the terreiros of Rio de Janeiro, however, there is nothing masculine about Pomba Gira. She is the female Exu” (“De Iyá Mi a Pomba Gira, 25–26, citing Castro, “Das línguas africanas ao português brasi leiro”).

Reginaldo Prandi concurred with Augras: “Certainly Pomba Gira is a corruption of Bongbogirá, and the name ended up referring to the feminine aspect of Exu” (“Pombagira,” 91). See also Roger Bastide, *African Civilizations in the New World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 109. Based on a similar theory of linguistic corruption, Zeca Ligiéro argued that Pomba Gira derives from the Kikongo term *mpomba nizilila*, meaning “crossroads” (*Malandro divino*, 76). Nonetheless I am aware of no research that examines this suggestion beyond the apparent linguistic similarities.

27. The Bahian singer Virginia Rodrigues included a song for Exu (“Canto para Exú”) on her album *Nós*, released in 2000, that includes the phrase *Bombo gira* in the lyrics: “Bombo gira já cujanjô iá iá ô rê rê . . . Bombo gira cujango jango.” The song is part of a liturgical corpus of songs dedicated to Exu in some Bahian Candomblé communities. In the late 1940s in Bahia, Edison Carneiro heard a song invoking Exu using the name Bombonjira in a Bantu Candomblé terreiro (*Candomblés da Bahia*, 70).

28. On the *exu* spirits as messengers, tricksters, and otherwise liminal beings charged with mediating the world of the *orixás* and the world of humans, see, among others, Carneiro, *Candomblés da Bahia*; Bastide, *O Candomblé da Bahia*; Prandi, *Herdeiras do axé* and *Mitologia dos orixás*; Berkenbrock, *A experiência dos orixás*. On the *exu* spirits as representations of the principle of disorder, see, among others, Brumana and Martínez, *Spirits from the Margins*; Magnani, *Umbanda*, 45–49. On the *exu* spirits as transgressing moral boundaries, see Trindade, “Exu: Reinterpretações individualizadas de um mito”; Prandi, “Pombagira”; Augras, “Maria Padilla, reina de la magia.” For an overview and analysis of Exu in both Candomblé and Umbanda, see Capone, *La quête*.

29. With this connection to death and sexuality, as well as his irreverent personality, Exu also bears certain similarities to the Gede spirits in Vodou such as Baron Samedi.

30. Negrão, *Entre a cruz e a encruzilhada*, 221.

31. See Birman, *O que é Umbanda*, 84–85.

32. DaMatta, *A casa e a rua*.

33. For an analogous example in Cuba, see Palmié's discussion of the kinship symbolism used with the *orichas* of Regla Ocha (also called Santería) in *Wizards and Scientists* (166).

34. As amoral, demanding, and potentially dangerous entities who must be "paid" before they will work, *exu* spirits bear certain similarities to the Petwo spirits of Haitian Vodou and the slave spirits (called *nfumbi*) of the *nganga* (a three-legged iron cauldron containing various symbolic objects) who are central to the Afro-Cuban practice called Palo Monte. Like the *exu* spirits, *nfumbi* are said to be the spirits of former human beings. However, unlike *nfumbi*, *exu* spirits are not captured by a priest (*tata nganga*) who has been commissioned for this purpose, nor are they understood to reside in material matter (bones or clothing, for example) associated with the dead. For more on the *nganga*, see Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists*, chapter 2. In "Conjuring the Past" Kenneth Routon discussed the *nganga* as an example of how Palo practitioners evoke Cuba's slave past as a source of spiritual power and a model of contemporary social relations.

35. Some Afro-Brazilian practitioners differentiate *exu* spirits from *ciganas* (gypsies) and *malandros* (street-savvy conmen), seeing them as three separate categories of spiritual beings. Others understand *malandros* as particular manifestations of *exu* spirits. For the sake of simplicity, I use the terms *exu spirits* and *povo da rua* interchangeably here. Some communities also recognize *marinheiros* (sailors), *cangaceiros* (rural bandits), and other marginal or outlaw figures among the *povo da rua*. These appear to be of more recent origin than *exu* spirits. The first references to them in Umbanda literature occurred in the late 1960s, according to Brumana and Martinez, coinciding "with the great migrations that from the 1960s onward concentrated in the big industrial cities" (*Spirits of the Margins*, 172 fn 34, 172). Consistent with this hypothesis, their mythology is less well developed than that of *exus*, *pretos velhos*, or *caboclos*, although their popularity seems to be growing. Others have seen the proliferation of distinct categories of spirit entities as indicative of Umbanda's sensibility to significant sociological and socioeconomic developments within Brazilian society, particularly among subaltern populations. See Negrão, *Entre a cruz e a encruzilhada*; Concone, "Caboclos e pretos-velhos da Umbanda."

36. Men who played *capoeira*, the Afro-Brazilian combination of dance and martial art, in the streets of Rio's bohemian district Lapa.

37. Although some say that Zé Pilintra hails from the northeastern city of Recife, he embodies all of the traits of the *malandro carioca*. On the figure of the *malandro* in Brazilian culture, see Roberto DaMatta's classic *Carnival, Rogues, and Heroes*. On Zé Pilintra more specifically, see Ligiéro, *Malandro divino*. The Disney cartoon character Zé Carioca is another take on the *malandro*. A green parrot snappily dressed in a suit and hat, Zé Carioca was inspired by Walt Disney's trip to Brazil in 1941 through the auspices of the Good Neighbor Policy during World War II. Zé appeared in *Saludos Amigos* (1942), *The Three Caballeros* (1944), and *Melody Time* (1948). Although he was little known in the United States, Zé Carioca was very popular in Brazil as a comic book character. See Daniella Thompson, "Blame It on Walt: How Ernesto Nazareth

Landed in a Donald Duck Cartoon,” retrieved July 6, 2008, from http://daniel.lathompson.com/Texts/Investigations/Disney_and_Nazareth.htm. See also Marcus Ramone, “Zé Carioca: Uma aventura editorial no Brasil,” retrieved July 6, 2008, from www.universohq.com/quadrinhos/2003/ze_carioca.cfm.

38.

Toda manhã
Quando eu desço a ladeira
A nega pensa
Que eu vou trabalhar
Eu ponho meu cachecol
No pescoço
Meto um baralho no bolso
E vou prá Barão de Mauá
Trabalhar, trabalhar prá que?
Se eu trabalhar
Eu vou morrer.

(Retrieved May 17, 2008, from www.umbandaquerida.kit.net/letexu.htm).

39. Lísias Nogueira Negrão provided a good sense of the range of opinion in his chapter on *exu* and *pomba gira* spirits in *Entre a cruz e a encruzilhada*. See also Trindade, “Exu: Reinterpretações individualizados de um mito” and *Exu, poder e perigo* (São Paulo: Editora Icone, 1985).

40. This interpretation also reflects practitioners’ efforts to harmonize contradictions between two different ways of conceptualizing spirit beings and to integrate *exus*, who are conceived as amoral entities, within a framework in which *orixás* are envisaged as moral beings. Thus my informants also claimed that *exus* cannot work without the “permission” of the *orixás*, effectively displacing moral responsibility for their actions onto the *orixás*, who, by definition, will not countenance “immoral” actions. Paradoxically, then, *exus* are both amoral and moral, a characteristic that enables individuals to claim that their use of the *exu* spirits is moral whereas that of their enemies is not. Chapter 8 addresses this productive ambiguity in more detail.

41. Trindade, “Exu: Reinterpretações individualizados de um mito,” 34.

42. Montero, *Da doença*, 200.

43. Prandi, *Herdeiras do axé*, 158; Maggie, *Guerra de orixá*, 115.

44. For example, the *orixás* may also take vengeance on neglectful *filhos-de-santo* (initiates) or afflict them with illness or misfortune in order to enforce their will.

45. As others have noted. See, for example, Negrão, “Umbanda”; Birman, *Umbanda*, 85.

46. Bramly, *Macumba*, 192.

47. Guillermprieto, *The Heart That Bleeds*, 162.

48. Prandi, “Pombagira,” 93.

49. Commonly translated as “shantytown,” the term *favela* is not necessarily restricted to those areas of makeshift housing without electricity or sewage that “shantytown” suggests. Indeed some of Rio’s *favelas* are of such long standing that they have had street lamps, sewers, and piped water installed by the Brazilian government.

50. In the religious vernacular, *barracão* indicates the main space for public ritualizing, usually a sheltered space with seating around the perimeter. The word itself means “shelter” or “tent.”

51. This is a common claim among practitioners of possession religions, especially Candomblé, which traditionally recognizes only unconscious possession. Whether or not the possessed person is actually unconscious during the possession is, of course, another issue. Daniel Halperin analyzed discourses of unconscious and conscious possession among participants of Tambor de Mina, an Afro-Brazilian tradition prominent in Maranhão. See “Memory and ‘Consciousness’ in an Evolving Brazilian Possession Religion,” *Anthropology of Consciousness* 6, no. 4 (December 1995): 1–17.

52. See Prandi, “Pombagira.”

53. *Ibid.*

CHAPTER THREE

1. For statistics on poverty and the inequitable distribution of wealth in Brazil, see World Bank, *Brazil*; United Nations Development Program, *Human Development Report*; Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Brazil*.

2. See Alvito, *As cores de Acari*, chapter 1.

3. The city defines a *favela* as “a predominately residential area, characterized by occupation of the land by low-income populations, precariousness of urban infrastructure and public services, narrow and irregularly aligned roads or passageways, plots of irregular form and size, and unlicensed constructions that do not conform to legal standards” (cited in Richardson and Kirsten, “Armed Violence and Poverty in Brazil,” 5). The newspaper *O Globo* (“the Globe”) reported in January 2008 that Acari had the largest growth of *favelas* in the city, citing figures from the mayor’s office. According to *Globo*, between 1999 and 2004 the number of irregular constructions in Acari increased by 15 percent (retrieved May 18, 2008, from <http://rjtv.globo.com/Jornalismo/RJTV/0,,MUL278722-9097,00.html>).

4. In 1993 IPLAN RIO (the Mayor’s Office Municipal Institute of Planning for the City of Rio de Janeiro) calculated that 17.7 percent of the city’s population of 5.4 million people lived in one of 573 *favelas*. In 2003 IPLAN RIO calculated that there were between 750 and 800 *favelas* in Rio, with 20 percent of the population living in a *favela*. See Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade*, 70. A UN estimate calculated that the number of urban poor living in Rio’s *favelas* and housing projects represented 40 percent of the city’s population (*Relatorio de Desenvolvimento Humano do Rio de Janeiro 2000* [Rio de Janeiro: United Nations Development Programme, 2001], cited in Wheeler, “New Forms of Citizenship,” 36). The estimated population of Rio de Janeiro in 2007 was 6,093,472 according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (www.ibge.gov.br/home/).

5. This may reflect the social stigma that is associated with *favelas*, or the fact that Nazaré lived on a paved road (*asfalto*) with urban infrastructure, characteristics not usually associated with *favelas*. Similarly Dowdney reported that a significant number of interviewees in a study of youth involvement in drug

trafficking claimed to live in the *asfalto*, not the *favela*, although all lived in urban areas defined as *favela* communities (*Children of the Drug Trade*, 175).

6. Also referred to as *ferros de assentamento* or simply *ferros*, from the Portuguese *ferro* (iron). When consecrated, these implements constitute part of the material embodiment, or *assento* (seat), of a particular entity and thus a point of contact between devotee and spirit, receiving offerings, libations, invocations, and petitions for assistance. “Ferramentas or ferros are the medium by which one perceives the deity’s presence, or through which a divinity makes itself present. More than this, we can say that, ritually, this type of object symbolizes the efficacious action of the forces that the corresponding entity represents, since, after all, what use is an instrument, if not to make things happen?” (Salum and Silva, “Por que das hastes de Ossaim brotam pássaros—até flechas brotam!—mas não folhas?” 292). In some communities the term *ferramentas* refers to the emblematic objects associated with each *orixá* that are part of the ritual costume worn by initiates during possession ceremonies.

7. Practitioners of Vodou and Santería also recognize structurally similar distinctions between different kinds of spiritual forces. See David H. Brown, *Santería Enthroned*, 117–18 for a discussion of how conceptually distinct spiritual energies are marked by similar strategies of spatial and ritual segregation among practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions.

8. Nei Lopes reported that in 1991 a Cuban *babalaô* named Rafael Zamora settled in Rio, where, along with another Cuban émigré, he became one of the leading revivers of Ifá worship (“African Religions in Brazil,” 858). I never came across any *babalaôs* during my research in Rio.

9. The Canudos rebellion was portrayed by Euclides da Cunha in his 1902 classic *Os Sertões* (translated into English as *Rebellion in the Backlands*). The term *favela* refers to the area of the interior where the followers of Antônio Conselheiro, the self-proclaimed prophet and leader of the revolt, were concentrated. The movement came to a dramatic ending in a standoff with the federal armies that ended in the massacre of Conselheiro and nearly all of his followers. Many of the soldiers returning to the capital (then Rio de Janeiro) from the Canudos campaign in 1897 settled in the Providence Hill area (Morro de Providência), which began to be referred to as Favela Hill (Morro de Favela). See Zaluar and Alvito, “Introdução” in *Um século de favela*; Pearse, “Some Characteristics of Urbanization in the City of Rio de Janeiro,” 191; Perlman, *The Myth of Marginality*, 13. See also Cunha, *Rebellion in the Backlands*. Others argue that *favelas* were first settled by African slaves and their descendents when overcrowded *cortiços* (tenements) in and around the city center were demolished by the authorities at the end of the nineteenth century. See Batista, Burgos, and Echevarría, “Quilombos, Cortiços, Favelas.”

10. See Zaluar and Alvito, *Um século de favela*. On the growth of Rio’s *favelas*, see Fiori, Riley, and Ramirez, “Urban Poverty Alleviation.” Janice Perlman’s survey studies among *favela* inhabitants in Rio de Janeiro in the late 1960s and 1970s indicated that an equal percentage had come from the states bordering Rio (Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo) as had come from the Northeast, and that a majority had come from towns and small cities rather than rural farms. Further, most migrants did not come to the city alone: 84 percent had friends, relatives, or both already living there (*The Myth of Marginality*, chapter 3).

11. Official statistics from the mayor's office of Rio de Janeiro list the population of Acari as 24,650 and records the existence of one public school (<http://portalgeo.rio.rj.gov.br/bairroscariocas/>; population figures are based on the 2000 census). In his ethnography of Acari, Marcos Alvito called attention to the differences between the geographical area identified as Acari by the municipal government and the community's own understanding of its territory, which comprises areas not included within these official boundaries. He put the population of the latter at 40,000. In addition the media often uses the term *Acari* or *Complexo de Acari* in a broad way to refer to events that occur in Acari or its environs (*As cores de Acari*, 22–23, 53–54).

12. Alvito, *As cores de Acari*, 21.

13. For a more comprehensive discussion of social and economic indices, see Zaluar and Alvito, *Um Século da Favela*; Zaluar, "Perverse Integration"; Richardson and Kirsten, "Armed Violence and Poverty in Brazil." Other scholars have explored these issues on the more intimate scale of everyday life in particular communities. I have found the following most useful: Sheriff, *Dreaming Equality*; Goldstein, *Laughter Out of Place*; Gay, *Lucia*; Perlman, "Marginality."

14. Official attitudes toward Rio's *favelas* and low-income housing in general have varied over the years from punitive to progressive, including policies aimed at razing *favelas* and outlawing their construction, policies that relocated residents to low-income housing projects on the periphery, and piecemeal government initiatives aimed at upgrading some of these areas or providing municipal services such as electricity or sewage treatment. In the absence of a coherent, well-funded, citywide program, small-scale, private initiatives to build roads or install electricity in particular *favelas* helped urbanize these areas over the years, as did populist vote bargaining. In 1994 the city introduced the "Favela-Bairro" (Favela-Neighborhood) initiative, a comprehensive effort to integrate *favelas* into the city through various projects of urban development. For a historical overview of the government's campaigns to address the "problem" of the *favela*, see Burgos, "Dos Parques Proletários ao Favela-Bairro." A summary discussion of twentieth-century government housing policy in Rio de Janeiro and an analysis of the Favela Bairro program may be found in Fiori, Riley, and Ramirez, "Urban Poverty Alleviation."

15. Nor, as Janice Perlman pointed out, has it provided reliable employment at a living wage, the very thing that would enable residents to end the cycle of chronic poverty: "The simple fact is that no amount of housing or infrastructure upgrading and no amount of 'integrated community development' or 'partnership strategic planning' can substitute for the ability to earn one's living through honest labor. Even young people caught up in drug dealing know that they risk early death and often say they would not be doing these things if there were other alternatives" ("The Metamorphosis of Marginality," 175–76).

16. In 1968, for example, the state government initiated a program of eradication that sought to eliminate all of Rio's *favelas* in the span of eight years. Residents were to be relocated into government housing projects distant from the city center and their shantytowns reappropriated for public or private use. Noteworthy was the official justification of the program, which combined the rhetoric of rehabilitation and the integration of *favela* dwellers into the larger

society with the rhetoric of removal: “The first objective of the program is the economic, social, moral, and hygienic reclaiming of the slum families. Likewise, the program aims at changing the slum-dwelling family’s position as squatters on other people’s property with all of the insecurity that goes with it, to that of owners of their own home. These families then become completely integrated in the community, especially in the way they think and live” (Coordenação de Habitação de Interesse Social da Área Metropolitana do Grande Rio (CHISAM), translated by Perlman, *Myth of Marginality*, 202). Before the program was abandoned in 1973, more than 175,000 people had been relocated and sixty-two *favelas* destroyed. A failure by any measure, the human cost of such relocation was especially devastating. After removal former *favela* dwellers found themselves literally cast out of the city, geographically isolated and far from the labor markets and the opportunities of the city that had initially attracted them. In addition the nascent political infrastructure that had been developed in *favela* residence organizations—which had been organized to negotiate with politicians and organs of the state—was largely destroyed, as Perlman documented (*Myth of Marginality*, chapter 7). In the early 1990s official attitudes began to change, as reflected in the program “Favela-Bairro” (Favela-Neighborhood), introduced in 1994.

17. The urbanization project of Mayor Pereira Passos (1902–6) first proposed the elimination of the *favelas* and tenement houses of the city center in the name of hygiene and succeeded in razing nearly three thousand dwellings. From the 1940s until the end of the 1980s successive administrations pursued different strategies of addressing the growing number of *favelas* with different levels of commitment, organization, and funding. These included eradication and relocation programs that resettled *favela* residents in government-constructed housing projects on the periphery of the city, as well as small-scale urbanization programs aimed at upgrading particular *favelas* and improving their infrastructure. For an overview, see Fiori, Riley, and Ramirez, “Urban Poverty Alleviation.”

18. In a sample survey conducted in three of Rio’s *favelas* in 1968–69, Janice Perlman found that 21 percent of *favelados* were black, 30 percent mulatto, and 49 percent white. In a follow-up study conducted thirty years later Perlman found similar percentages, although she reported that “there was a clear tendency for blacks to remain concentrated in *favelas*, and for whites to move to residential neighborhoods” (*Myth of Marginality*, 128).

However, my own experience confirms Robin Sheriff’s observation that Rio’s *favelas* have a greater percentage of blacks than do middle- or upper-class neighborhoods. See Sheriff, *Dreaming Equality*, 18.

19. See Oliveira, “Favelas and Ghettos.” There is a significant body of work on race and racism in Brazil, much of it comparing Brazil to the United States. Some of the major comparative studies are Degler, *Neither Black nor White*; Skidmore, *Black into White*; and Fontaine, *Race, Class, and Power in Brazil*. More recently, Micol Seigel analyzed twentieth century racial constructions in Brazil and the United States as the product of transnational exchanges of images and ideas (Seigel, *Uneven Encounters*).

20. Alvito and Zaluar, *Um século de favela*, 8.

21. The populist administration of Leonel Brizola in the early 1980s marked a significant change in the state government’s approach to the housing problem

in Rio. Elected on the strength of his campaign promise to improve the lives of the poor and working classes, Brizola began an ambitious program to legalize land tenure and to improve the sanitation infrastructure of all the city's *favelas* (although it ultimately met few of its goals). See Fiori, Riley, and Ramirez, "Urban Poverty Alleviation," 54; Riley, "A Portrait of 'Illegality,'" 3.

22. According to the Institute of Public Security for the state of Rio de Janeiro, approximately 71 percent of homicides in Rio are caused by firearms (*Relatório temática bala perdida*, 6). In 2006 there were 224 incidents of people hit by a stray bullet, 19 fatal and 205 nonfatal. In the first half of 2007, 170 people in the city of Rio were hit by a stray bullet. Of that number, 12 were fatal and 158 were not fatal; 79 percent were hit on a public street (5). On rising murder rates in Rio, see Human Rights Watch, "Fighting Violence with Violence," 1. See also Zaluar, "The Paradoxes of Democratization and Violence in Brazil," 6.

23. Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade*, 90–117. Today the risk of death by firearm in Brazil is 2.6 times that in the rest of the world.

24. According to Robert Gay, the mortality rate for homicides committed with firearms for this demographic of the population increased 95 percent between 1991 and 2000 (Gay, *Lucia*, 178n5).

25. Such events are too numerous to cite here. For a representative example, see Penglase, "The Shutdown of Rio de Janeiro." A significant part of the problem is the fact that the authorities have little control over imprisoned traffickers in the prison system, who continue to direct criminal activities from behind bars via cell phones or other communications devices. Between 2000 and 2005 five prison officials at the Bangu prison complex in Rio were murdered after trying to institute reforms designed to curb the use of cell phones and radios (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4543216.stm>, accessed June 8, 2009).

26. For example, federal troops were stationed in Rio for the Pan-Am Games held in 2007 (www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/03/AR2007010301334.html, accessed June 25, 2008).

27. Human Rights Watch, "Fighting Violence with Violence."

28. Michel Misse argued that the fear of violence among *cariocas* goes back to the mid-1970s (and therefore predates the institutionalization of the cocaine trade in Rio), as a result of an increasing number of robberies of homes, businesses, and banks and assaults on persons ("Mercados ilegais," 147).

29. The kidnapers then hold the victim hostage until the family pays a ransom. There has been a great deal of news coverage of cases involving wealthy Brazilians and at least two documentaries about the problem of kidnapping in Brazil (*Manda Bala*, Jason Kohn, 2007; *Kidnap Cops*, Benito Montorio, 2006). See, for example, the BBC article "Brazil's Evolving Kidnap Culture."

Female members of wealthy families also are favored targets of kidnapers since they are seen as "softer." In a span of seven months in 2005 the mothers of five top Brazilian soccer players were kidnapped and held for ransom. See Andrew Downie, "Kidnappings Target Brazil's Soccer Moms: Gangs Seek Ransoms from Star Players," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 11, 2005, A1, retrieved April 20, 2008, from www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2005/07/11/MNGJ2DLUUB1.DTL.

30. Caldeira, *City of Walls*.

31. *Ibid.*, 19.
32. <http://video.globo.com/Videos/Player/Noticias/0,,GIM817493-7823-MAIS+UM+DIA+DE+TIROTEIOS+NA+FAVELA+DA+CHATUBA,00.html>. Accessed June 25, 2008.
33. <http://rjtv.globo.com/Jornalismo/RJTV/0,,MUL136286-9099,00.html>. Accessed June 25, 2008.
34. <http://rjtv.globo.com/Jornalismo/RJTV/0,,MUL446340-9099,00.html>. Accessed June 25, 2008.
35. Academics, policy analysts, and social workers who have studied the growth of the drug trade in Rio or worked with *favela* populations are unanimous on this point. See, for example, Zaluar, “Perverse Integration,” 658; Goldstein, *Laughter Out of Place*; Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade*; Perlman, “Marginality,” 124–25.
36. Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade*, 29–34; Richardson and Kirsten, “Armed Violence,” 13–14; Zaluar, “Paradoxes of Democratization,” 15; Barbosa, *Um abraço para todos os amigos*; McCann, “The Evolution of Rio de Janeiro’s Favelas.”
37. Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade*, 25; Gay, *Lucia*, 5.
38. See Zaluar, *Condomínio do diabo*, Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade*, 51, 76; Alvito, *As cores de Acari*, 58; Goldstein, *Laughter Out of Place*, 180.
39. Although Robert Gay’s research indicates that this may be changing. Lucia, the “drug dealer’s woman” that he interviewed at length, claimed that “women are very involved. There are women who deal drugs, women who carry and use guns, and women who are *gerentes* and *donos* [positions within the *quadrilha*’s hierarchy]. Today they are very involved. . . . Women are used to transport drugs, weapons, everything” (*Lucia*, 19).
40. Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade*, 74; Zaluar, “Perverse Integration”; Barbosa, *Um abraço*, 86–95.
41. Gay, *Lucia*.
42. In some cases local leaders who resisted their presence or were suspected of working with law enforcement authorities against the interests of the trade were murdered. In a widely reported case from 1990 three people connected with the Residents Association of the Santa Marta *favela*—the association’s secretary and its president and his wife—were assassinated after publicly protesting the actions of drug traffickers in their community (Leeds, “Cocaina e poderes paralelos na periferia urbana brasileira,” 252). The Commission against Violence and Impunity (Comissão Contra Violência e a Impunidade) estimated that one hundred community leaders were murdered by drug traffickers between 1992 and 2001 (*O Globo*, July 20, 2001, cited in Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade*, 55–56). Alba Zaluar cited the same statistic, adding that between 1992 and 2001 eight hundred community leaders were expelled, murdered, or co-opted by drug traffickers (“Paradoxes of Democratization,” 21). However, Zaluar gave the date of the *Globo* report as June 20, 2002.
43. See Dowdney (*Children of the Drug Trade*, 52–56) for an account of how drug faction domination of *favela* communities built on preexisting structures of control and protection oriented around local strongmen.

44. This is another point on which the literature is unanimous. For example, see Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade*, 52–62; Penglase, “The Shutdown of Rio de Janeiro,” 5; Soares, *Meu casaco de general*, 40.

45. Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade*, 60.

46. Zaluar, “Paradoxes of Democratization,” 2. See McCann, “The Evolution” for a short overview of the institutionalization of the traffic in Rio and its resultant problems, and Zaluar for a more comprehensive account that considers the political, social, economic, and historical processes that facilitated the implantation of armed drug trafficking gangs in Rio’s *favelas*.

47. Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade*, 58; Arias, “Faith in Our Neighbors,” 3; Amnesty International, “Brazil.”

48. For a summary overview of the historical relations among police, *favela* communities, and drug trafficking, see Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade*, 78–89. Robert Gay offers an intimate look at police violence from the perspective of *favela* residents in *Lucia*.

49. Typically police, government authorities, and the media maintain that because *favela* communities are so dominated by armed drug factions, police are unable to go in without a firefight. However, Dowdney’s research revealed that this is the case only in situations where the police target a particular trafficker or start shooting first. Because drug trafficking is a commercial operation and the presence of the police interferes with business, shooting at police is contrary to business interests: “In most cases, traffickers tend to avoid confrontation with the police if possible” (Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade*, 85–86). In one of the worst of several police massacres of *favela* residents in the 1990s, off-duty police killed twenty-one residents of Vigário Geral, including families asleep in their beds, in retaliation for the deaths of four of their colleagues the previous day. None of the victims was involved in the trade. For more information on the *chacina de Vigário Geral*, see <http://www.redecontraviolencia.org/Casos/1993/245.html> (accessed April 19, 2008).

50. Human Rights Watch, “Overview of Human Rights Issues in Brazil,” December 31, 2005, www.hrw.org/english/docs/2006/01/18/brazil12204.htm (accessed April 20, 2008); Amnesty International, “Brazil.”

51. Amnesty International, “Brazil,” 9; Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade*, 81.

52. Amnesty International, “Brazil,” 17; Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade*, 77; Gay, *Lucia*, 84–85.

53. No one was ever convicted of the crime. Seventeen years after the massacre, in March 2007, the police, following an anonymous tip, found the remains of the eleven victims in a clandestine cemetery on the outskirts of Rio (retrieved November 17, 2008, from <http://g1.globo.com/Noticias/Rio/0,,MUL9979-5606,00.html>). On the Mothers of Acari, see Nobre, *Mães de Acari: Uma história de luta contra a impunidade* and *Mães de Acari: Uma história de protagonismo social*. (Rio de Janeiro: Pallas, 2005).

54. Marcos Alvito reported that the 1996 police occupation also negatively impacted the local economy, which relied on the constant influx of people in search of drugs who ended up spending money in the local bars, *birosacas*, and restaurants. As a result a large number of people became unemployed (*As cores de Acari*, 58).

55. In *City of Walls* Teresa P. R. Caldeira explored similar transformations of urban space in São Paulo and analyzed how fear of crime and violence have increased social segregation and discrimination in Brazil's largest city. Perlman reported similar findings in *Myth of Marginality*, 130–31 and “The Metamorphosis of Marginality,” 173.

56. See, among others, Perlman, “The Metamorphosis of Marginality,” 154, 173, 175; Perlman, *Myth of Marginality*, 130–31, 138.

57. Other researchers have indicated that neighborhoods dominated by the drug factions typically are subject to a *lei do silêncio*, or law of silence, which forbids residents from discussing the trade lest information be passed to rival gangs or the police. See Gay, *Lucia*, 7; Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade*, 63–64.

58. The subject of evangelical Christianity lies beyond the scope of this book, and my remarks are summary at best. There is an extensive literature on the growth, impact, and appeal of evangelical Christian forms of Protestantism, particularly Pentecostalism, in Brazil. Of the English-language works that I consulted, I found the following most useful: Chestnut, *Born Again in Brazil*, *Competitive Spirits*, and “Pragmatic Consumers and Practical Products,” 28–29; Mariz and Machado, “Pentecostalism and Women in Brazil”; Mariz, *Coping with Poverty*.

59. See Goldstein, *Laughter Out of Place*, 223.

60. *Ibid.*, 224.

61. Literally “funk dance,” a neighborhood dance party. *Bailes* often are underwritten by the local traffickers in order to increase positive relations with the community as well as to publicly display their generosity toward residents. They can attract hundreds of attendees from the neighborhood and surrounding areas, providing a ready market for the traffickers as well as local ambulatory vendors who sell snacks and drinks.

62. See, for example, Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade*, 78–89; Fernandes, “Urban Violence and Civic Action,” 10; Human Rights Watch, “Fighting Violence with Violence”; Goldstein, *Laughter Out of Place*, chapter 5.

63. Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade*, 81.

CHAPTER FOUR

1. Because of their residence, people living in the *favela* have a harder time finding jobs, and many are hesitant to give their real address in job interviews, believing that it will hinder their prospects. “If you interview for a job and they see your address,” one woman reported to the American sociologist Janice Perlman, “they say the job has been filled” (*Myth to Reality*, 118, 135, quote on 118). Similar findings are reported in Amnesty International, “Brazil,” 16; Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade*, 77.

2. Goffman, *Stigma*.

3. Scheper-Hughes, *Death without Weeping*, 374.

4. The 2003 film *City of God* embodies nearly all of these aspects of the pe-riphery. It focuses on a generation in the life of a *favela* in Rio named City of God and its inhabitants, who are subsumed by the escalating cycle of violence that accompanied the rise of the drug trade. Graphically the film portrays the physical transformation of City of God from its beginnings as a government-

funded housing project of carefully spaced domiciles to a crowded, concrete-paved jumble of irregularly constructed housing whose inhabitants live in terror of warring drug lords and their gun-toting teen recruits. Although the violence in the film is shocking, even by Hollywood standards, in the context of Rio's *favelas* it is not inaccurate.

5. Goldstein reported that her middle-class associates reacted to her own ethnographic research in one of Rio's *favelas* in similar ways (*Laughter Out of Place*, 176).

6. Alvito, *As cores de Acari*, 62–63.

7. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 78–86; Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 53.

8. Cynthia Sarti described a similar dynamic in São Paulo's periphery, in which poor residents define themselves in a process of moral differentiation from others ("Morality and Transgression among Brazilian Poor Families," 123). In her work on discourses about crime in São Paulo and how they have reshaped the geographical and social spaces of the city, Teresa Caldeira observed the same moralizing language (*City of Walls*).

9. For a more comprehensive discussion of the intersection of gender and reputation than is possible here, see the following works: Alvito, *As cores de Acari*; Fonseca, *Familia, fofoca e honra*; Rebhun, *The Heart Is Unknown Country*; Sarti, "Morality and Transgression."

10. The description of behavioral ideals as a blueprint comes from ethnographer L. A. Rebhun, who described this hegemonic model and how it is expressed in men's and women's differing conceptions of love, marriage, and sexuality in *The Heart Is Unknown Country*.

11. Richard Parker described traditional ideas about gender and sexuality as a "cultural grammar" in *Beneath the Equator*, 29.

12. Perhaps this situation is best understood not in terms of the continuity or rupture of traditional gender norms, but as the coexistence of plural worlds that are experienced and expressed differently by different individuals, and whose inherent contradictions do not necessarily require resolution, as Jeni Vaitsman wrote in "Pluralidade de mundos entre mulheres urbanas de baixa renda."

13. It bears reiterating that the modernization process has produced lifestyles and values such as those emphasizing democracy, equality, individualism, autonomy, self-reliance, and consumerism that contradict in many ways the traditional structure of gender norms and expectations that I am outlining here. This "plurality of worlds," as Jeni Vaitsman called it, has produced new social arrangements, particularly among young people. In her research Vaitsman observed that the modern emphasis on greater personal liberty was accompanied by an easing of the traditional moral restrictions on sexual behavior, resulting in increased rates of adolescent pregnancy and the absence of fathers in the raising of these children. She noted as well that the typical response of these single teen mothers to the lack of male participation in the raising of their children was "I don't want anything from him" ("Pluralidade," 316). Despite this plurality of worlds, however, the traditional model continues to be, if not hegemonic, then at least predominant, especially among an older generation of *favela* dwellers. Rebhun also examined these contradictions in *The Heart Is Unknown Country*.

14. Rebhun explored gender and sexual mores in more detail than is possible here. As she noted, the significance of virginity in Brazil has varied historically and according to the class, color, and class aspirations of the woman and her family (*The Heart Is Unknown Country*, 102–3).

15. As Fonseca noted in *Família, fofoca e honra*, 44. See also Rebhun, *The Heart Is Unknown Country*.

16. Indeed it is widely considered a husband's duty to correct a negligent wife, and such beatings are the most common way of fulfilling this duty. Only in the most severe cases will family members intervene on behalf of a wife, and only then if they feel that the beating itself has not been warranted by the woman's conduct. However, although the husband has the final word in disciplining the household, there are also social limits to masculine violence. Physical aggression toward a young child, a pregnant woman, or an elderly woman is considered a cause for scandal. See Fonseca, *Família, fofoca e honra*, 78. She provided several quotes in support of this, including the following: "A woman should be beaten by her husband. The more she is struck, the more she clings to him, no?" ("Mulher tem que apanhar do marido mesmo. Quanto mais surra, mas ela fica agarrada, não é?").

17. As L. A. Rebhun observed. She discussed the interaction of these factors in more detail in "Sexuality, Color, and Stigma among Northeast Brazilian Women," 193.

18. Fonseca, *Família, fofoca e honra*, 32. Women living alone, as Rebhun pointed out, are also prime targets for sexual harassment (*The Heart Is Unknown Country*, 123).

19. See Goldstein, *Laughter Out of Place*.

20. As Vaitsman noted, while upper- and middle-class women have "broken with roles restricted to the private sphere, searching for personal realization in the public world of career and remunerated work," the education and identity of lower-class women remains strongly traditional. This, plus the fact that jobs for lower-class women are poorly paid, repetitive, and lack any chance for personal fulfillment, contributes to the continued valorization of the role of spouse and housewife ("Pluralidade," 305).

21. See Goldstein, *Laughter Out of Place*; Rebhun, *The Heart Is Unknown Country*, 118–24; Vaitsman, "Pluralidade"; Fonseca, *Família, fofoca e honra*. Patricia Lerch made the same observation in "Spirit Mediums in Umbanda Evangelizada of Porto Alegre, Brazil," 153.

22. For a more in-depth discussion of these ideals in the Brazilian Northeast, see Rebhun, *The Heart Is Unknown Country*, chapter 5.

23. Alvito, *As cores de Acari*, 253. *Forró* is a type of music that originated in the Northeast that is similar to a polka. It is characterized both by the distinctive sound of the accordion and an equally distinctive dance in which the hips and buttocks are featured. It is almost always danced in couples. Thus those men who stay out until dawn dancing *fórró* presumably have female partners who are not their wives. Because it is highly unlikely that a married woman would attend a *fórró* without her husband, these female partners are probably unmarried—a fact that points to the differential criterion for female behavior based on marital status, as well as the circulation of different norms of female conduct that in many cases are generationally specific.

24. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 78–86; Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, chapter 3.

25. I say “ostensible control” because this dynamic can perhaps be better understood as one in which it is less the husband himself than a larger set of social norms that is operative here. In this sense the husband is merely the instrument through which social norms are instantiated; his behavior is as subject to these norms as that of his wife.

26. Fonseca, *Família, fofoca e honra*, 154–55; Rehbun, *The Heart Is Unknown Country*, 199–203. The quote is from Alvito, *As cores de Acari*, 253. Crimes of passion committed by a husband against his adulterous wife or her lover in order to restore his compromised honor were sometimes defended in court as the *legítima defesa de honra* (legitimate defense of honor), although there was no established legal principle for this in the Brazilian Penal Code.

27. Fonseca, *Família, fofoca e honra*, 154–55. Accordingly the cuckolds of the neighborhood were one of the most frequent topics of gossip among her female informants and were regularly pointed out to her.

28. This is also apparent in many fundamentalist religious movements, which tend to be composed of men who inhabit socially, ethnically, or economically marginal positions (or who feel marginalized) and who attempt to rehabilitate traditional gender and sexual roles as a response to a world they feel has gone seriously awry. Putting women “back in their place” (that is, in the home) is often an explicit focus of such movements, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, which was successful (albeit briefly) in eliminating women from public life altogether. As Mark Juergensmeyer observed, “Such cases exemplify an assertion of masculinity and a recovery of public virility that is at once sexual, social, and political” (*Terror in the Mind of God*, 200).

29. As Alvito put it in *As cores de Acari*, 253. Rehbun observed the same dynamics of gender and sexuality that I describe here in *The Heart Is Unknown Country*, 199–203, and “Sexuality, Color, and Stigma,” 183–99.

30. Fonseca, *Família, fofoca e honra*, 128.

31. *Viado* is sometimes spelled *veado*.

32. Although both of these ways of correlating sexual activity and social identity are present in Brazil, they tend to circulate in different social milieus. For analyses of the signifying role of penetration in particular, see Peter Fry, “Homossexualidade masculina e cultos afro-brasileiros,” in *Para inglês ver*, 54–86; Fry, “Male Homosexuality and Spirit Possession in Brazil”; Parker, *Bodies, Pleasures, Passions* and “Masculinity, Femininity, and Homosexuality”; Matory, “Homens montados.” For more ethnographically grounded histories of homosexuality, see Parker, *Beneath the Equator*; Green, *Beyond Carnival*. As these analysts have noted, it is important to keep in mind that multiple systems of sexual classification coexist in present-day Brazil. For example, the American gay rights movement of the 1970s and 1980s brought to Brazil a new way of conceptualizing sexual behavior, one oriented toward the object of sexual desire rather than the semiotics of penetration. These classificatory systems are distinct in terms of historical origin, although they overlap in various ways in the contemporary context. The conceptual contrast between *macho* and *viado* is the older system and continues to be prevalent among working-class populations and in disadvantaged regions.

33. This is not to suggest that government, medical, church, and scientific authorities have not attempted to regulate or repress prostitution in various ways, but rather that it has typically been seen as a *mal necessário*, or a necessary evil, the product of humanity's natural drive for sex. See Carrara, *Tributo ao Vênus*; Parker, *Bodies, Pleasures and Passions*, 81; Rago, "Prostituição e mundo boêmio em São Paulo," 51.

34. With the possible exception of the *viado*.

35. For similar observations on this social distinction, see Goldstein, *Laughter Out of Place*, 169; Zaluar, *A máquina e a revolta*.

36. Here I draw largely on Dowdney's discussion of local social networks in the *favela* prior to the implantation of the drug trade (*Children of the Drug Trade*, 52–53).

37. Zaluar, *Condomínio do diabo*, 433.

38. Robert Gay's *Lucia: Testimonies of a Brazilian Drug Dealer's Woman* is a vivid account of this viral culture and some of its consequences as seen in the life of one woman.

39. Zaluar, *Condomínio do diabo*, 142.

40. Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade*, 225.

41. See Goldstein, *Laughter Out of Place*, 179; Zaluar, "Paradoxes," 17–19.

42. Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade*, 61–70, quotes on 62.

43. In thinking about male-female relations in urban Brazil, I am indebted to Karen McCarthy Brown's discussion of female-headed Vodou temples in New York, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*.

CHAPTER FIVE

1. Depending on the type of spirit and the severity of its disturbance, they are expelled through special offerings, *os passes* (the laying on of hands by a trained medium), or more complex rituals called *descarrego* or *desobsessão*. These are more common among Kardecist forms of Espiritismo than in Umbanda, although there is great overlap in the ritual practices ostensibly defined by these terms. See Hess, "Disobsessing Disobsession" and "Ghosts and Domestic Politics in Brazil"; Serra, "No caminho de Aruanda"; Magnani, "Doença mental e cura na Umbanda," 4.

2. Thus rehabilitated *exus* sometimes are referred to as *exus batizados* or baptized *exus*.

3. There is a growing bibliography on Spiritism and Umbanda, and my remarks here are summary at best. For a more extensive history of Umbanda, see Brown, *Umbanda* and "Umbanda and Class Relations in Brazil"; Montero, *Da doença à desordem*; Negrão, "A Umbanda como expressão da religiosidade popular"; Birman, *O que é a Umbanda*. On Spiritism, see Hess, *Samba in the Night* and *Spirits and Scientists*; Cavalcanti, *O mundo invisível*. On Kardecism and its contribution to Spiritist cults in Brazil, see Camargo, *Kardecismo e Umbanda*.

4. These codes may also be learned through regular participation over time. Nazaré had several adepts, including her second son, Geraldo, who, despite not having gone through initiation, had mastered the corporeal semiotics of

possession to a high degree. All of these people had grown up surrounded by Afro-Brazilian religions and had thoroughly imbibed these ritual codes.

5. In addition to the more common entities (*pretos velhos*, *caboclos*, *exus*), one can also find “crossed” spirits, particularly in cases where there is a basic overlap in the attributes attributed to each: a *caboclo-boaideiro*, for example. Both *caboclos* and *boaideiros* display independence and a physical masculinity produced by living close to nature. For more on crossed spirits and their semiotic characteristics, see Brumana and Martínez, *Spirits From the Margins*, chapter 3.

6. This description follows Magnani, “Doença mental e cura na Umbanda,” 4.

7. Nineteenth-century Indianist writers, as well as popular depictions of North American Indians, seem to be the primary inspirations for the figure of the *caboclo* in Umbanda. For example, *caboclos* frequently are depicted wearing elaborate feather headdresses of the sort used by some North American tribes, yet such headdresses are not found among the indigenous peoples of South America. On the influence of romantic writers on *caboclo* imagery, see Carneiro, *Ladinos e Crioulos*, 143; Ortiz, *A morte branca do feiticeiro negro*, 72–73; Brown, *Umbanda*, 65–67. For a fascinating discussion of how race intersects with the stereotype of the *preto velho*, see Burdick, “The Spirit of Rebel and Docile Slaves.” A sociological analysis of various depictions of the *preto velho* as expressing different attitudes toward the historical figure of the Afro-Brazilian may be found in Hale, “Preto Velho.”

8. As a result those who are mentally impaired are unlikely to be able to sufficiently master the codes within which possession is made meaningful, since such mastery requires a high degree of social adroitness.

9. Gilberto Freyre, *Casa grande e senzala: Formação da família brasileira sob o regime da economia patriarcal* (translated into English as *The Masters and the Slaves*). In a passage echoing the work of Freyre, Roger Bastide characterizes the structure of the colonial Brazilian family in terms strikingly similar to Nazaré’s own narrative depictions, writing that around its patriarchal authority clustered “first his own family, over which he exercised absolute power, marrying off his children as he pleased, openly and without scruple betraying his wife with colored mistresses” (*The African Religions of Brazil*, 39).

10. Claudia Fonseca noted that this was a frequent pattern among the lower-class communities that she studied; among households in which the father was present, a daughter’s association with unrelated males threatened paternal control of her sexuality and typically resulted in her expulsion from his household (*Família, fofoca e honra*, 29).

11. Most Brazilians describe a couple’s coresidence as “marriage” and most make little distinction between legal marriages and coresidence. Once a couple has moved in together, they are deemed married by family and friends alike, until such time as one or the other forsakes this living arrangement for another.

12. In her research the Brazilian anthropologist Paula Montero observed a similar pattern, in which it was a third party, and never the ill person herself, who proposed a diagnosis of spirit disturbance: a friend, family member, or

sometimes even a medical doctor frustrated at the lack of an organic cause for his patient's malady (*Da doença a desordem*).

13. Here Nazaré used the term *macumba* in its pejorative sense, as black magic.

14. The term *indoctrinate* is used in a different sense in Kardecist-influenced centers, where it usually refers to a process in which a perturbing spirit is taught Kardecist doctrine, and through this process is rendered cognizant of the need to help human beings in order to advance its own spiritual evolution.

15. Many researchers have noted the tendency, beginning perhaps as early as the 1960s, of Umbanda leaders introducing Candomblé spirits and practices, resulting in *terreiros* that are characterized as mixed, combining various elements of both traditions. Some have characterized this as a move toward re-Africanization on the part of Umbanda, seeking to incorporate some of the “authenticity” attached to the African tradition as represented by Candomblé (Prandi, “African Gods in Contemporary Brazil” and *Os Candomblés de São Paulo*; Teixeira and Pordeus, “Candomblé/Umbanda”; Johnson, *Secrets, Gossip and Gods*, 156.) Others have seen it as a result of an increasing globalization of the religious marketplace (Motta, “The Churchifying of Candomblé”) or an expression of a burgeoning black consciousness and African cultural pride movement (Brown, *Umbanda*, xx–xxv). Still others have seen this as merely one indication among many of a religious field profoundly marked by the fluidity of its frontiers—whether those frontiers separate one cult from another, one “nation” from another, or one set of religious practices and understandings from another (Birman, *Fazer estilo*, 13–26).

16. Xangô is one of the most important African deities in the New World, connected with the powers of the celestial sphere: meteorites, the rays of the sun, the thunderbolt. As one of his most important wives, Oyá shares with Xangô dominion over the skies.

17. A reversal of the ritual sequence typical of Candomblé *terreiros* in which Exu, the guardian of the crossroads and a trickster, is saluted before any of the other *orixás* with offerings of manioc flour mixed with palm oil (the *padê* or *despacho*) and requested to retire to his abode so that the ceremony may proceed without threat of his wily pranks. In the regular, bimonthly ceremonies at Nazaré's center, that part of the ceremony devoted to the *orixás* in many ways served as the ritual preface to the arrival of the *exus*, who stayed longer, were greeted with greater interest, and in general seemed to create more excitement among both spectators and participants. This is not to say that the *orixás* were not the focus of sustained ritual attention by the community; the liturgical year was punctuated by *festas* in their honor, and Nazaré maintained altars dedicated to individual *orixás*. But in those regular, bimonthly ceremonies, they often seemed like the warm-up act for the evening's main event: the arrival of the *exu* spirits.

18. In *Death without Weeping* Nancy Scheper-Hughes discussed the social significance of a father's provision of (or refusal to provide) milk for his newborn progeny among the shantytown dwellers that she worked with in the Brazilian Northeast. In an environment in which female-headed households are common and long-term, monogamous relationships rare, for a man to provide

milk for his child signals his readiness to fulfill the traditional male role of head of household—whether or not he provides anything else. As a result this index of male responsibility is extremely significant for women.

19. Although during their brief separation when she was pregnant with their second child she worked at an optical shop, and after Nilmar lost his job she was forced to take on various odd jobs in addition to her work as a religious healer in order to support the family.

20. The term she used is *se apaixonar*, which does not have a succinct translation in English. Brazilians differentiate between the verbs *se apaixonar*, “to be impassioned,” and *amar*, “to love.” The former connotes a state of enthusiastic but temporary passion. The verb *amar* suggests a more moderate and permanent emotional state. *Amar* thus is used to describe one’s feelings for one’s family or one’s spouse, while *se apaixonar* can be used to describe a momentary attraction that inspires great feeling. To wit, the state denoted by the verb *se apaixonar* can be transformed into that denoted by *amar*, but the reverse does not hold.

21. In Brazil the pre-Lenten festival of Carnival takes place over an entire week.

CHAPTER SIX

1. See Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*; Lewis, Al-Saffi, and Hurriez, *Women’s Medicine*; Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits*; Kenyon, “The Case of the Butcher’s Wife”; Chestnut, “Pragmatic Consumers.”

2. Capone, *La quête*, 181.

3. The concept of spiritual equilibrium is fundamental in Afro-diasporan spirit cults and has been addressed by many authors. For the Brazilian case, see, among others, Montero, *Da doença*; Barros and Teixeira, “O código do corpo.”

4. An individual’s “years in the saint” refers to the length of time she or he has been initiated into a Candomblé community. Nazaré used the expression here to indicate the number of years that she had cultivated an intense relationship with the spirits.

5. An initial period of reluctance is also a prominent motif in the life stories of those who serve the spirits in other parts of the Afro-diasporan world. In Karen McCarthy Brown’s account of the life of a Haitian Vodou priestess in New York, *Mama Lola*, both Mama Lola and her daughter Maggie described their initial unwillingness to become initiated and thus embark upon a life serving the spirits. For both, only repeated illness overcame this initial reluctance.

6. See Birman, *Fazer estilo*. In her analysis of gender and possession in Afro-Brazilian cults, Birman observed that some of her male Candomblé informants, in marked contrast to her female informants, also frequently claimed that they had been “taken” by the spirits against their will. Unlike the women, these men described going to great lengths to avoid becoming initiated (which involves developing the ability to receive the spirits in possession trance). Birman interpreted this as a consequence of the association of Candomblé possession with femininity: men were reluctant to admit conscious or willing cultivation of possession as a point of male honor, lest they be considered *bichas* (effeminate males).

This same reluctance was not exhibited by those men who self-identified as *bichas* or who were so considered. On the contrary, Birman found that in Umbanda possession was not associated as strongly with femininity (81–94). Birman’s work was conducted among those Candomblé houses that diverged from the orthodox “ideal” of Nagô Candomblé, and her analysis of gender forms part of a larger critique of the academic construction of this ideal.

7. The term *cobrança* comes from the verb *cobrar*, to charge (as in a fee) for some good or service, or to enact a punishment (as in a fine). In both cases the term implies a reciprocal structure of obligations between two parties that either is upheld, as in the first sense, or whose breach must be rectified, as in the second sense.

CHAPTER SEVEN

1. Based on a tape recording of our conversation. I have edited out the pauses and remarks that are not directly related to the narrative.

2. In one version of the story she described the drink as lemonade, in another as tonic water; however, the important point, as will become clear, is that it was a nonalcoholic beverage.

3. Neto, *Pomba-Gira*, xvii–xviii.

4. Although I have no numerical data to support this, my experience and popular sentiment in Rio indicate that women greatly outnumber men among Pomba Gira’s devotees and clients. See also Capone *La quête*; Contins, “O Caso da Pomba Gira.” In his discussion of Pomba Gira, “Pombagira,” Reginaldo Prandi observed that this spirit is most commonly called upon to resolve romantic and sexual problems, but he does not elaborate further.

5. Capone, *La quête*, 181.

6. Capone reported that male practitioners of Umbanda and Candomblé often accuse women of exploiting their husband’s credulity. She cited the remarks of one such man as representative: “It is women who profit from this story of Pomba Gira. They say that it is the fault of Pomba Gira if they plant a pair of horns on the head of their husband [i.e., cuckold him]. As for me, I think that you shouldn’t mix the two: a husband is a husband and a saint [spirit] is a saint. You cannot exploit the saint to do what you want” (*ibid.*, 200).

7. Orsi, “‘He Keeps Me Going,’” 339.

8. Masquelier, “From Hostage to Host,” 50.

9. Birman discussed this triangulation of wills in *Transas*.

CHAPTER EIGHT

1. I accompanied Margarida’s case from the sidelines and interviewed both her and Nazaré about the various *trabalhos* that Nazaré prepared for her; however, with the exception of the *trabalho de amarração* described in this chapter, I did not witness their implementation.

2. Alkimin, *O livro vermelho da Pomba Gira*, 13.

3. For example, Frazer, *The Golden Bough*; Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*; Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*.

4. See Hayes, “Black Magic and the Academy.”

5. See Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 117–18. See also Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists*, 168. Pemba is a ubiquitous ingredient in Afro-Brazilian ritual. The word itself probably derived from *mpemba*, a white clay that among the Bakongo peoples was associated with departed spirits (Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 118). In his historical account of Central African influences in Brazil, James Sweet wrote that Central African spirit mediums used *mpemba* to make themselves more accessible to the spirit world: “It was believed that the spirits of the dead went to *mpemba*, or the underground world of white clay, when they left their coffins.” Sweet asserted that white clay came to symbolize the “good” dead and was used in Central Africa as a protective balm against malevolence (*Recreating Africa*, 149). Pemba is not unique to Brazil, however: a similar white chalk is used as a ritual substance in other Afro-diasporan traditions, such as Santería.

6. From the Portuguese verb *despachar* (to dispatch). The term connotes all of the various meanings of its English corollary: to send off something or transmit a message to a particular destination; to instruct a subordinate to go somewhere to carry out a task; to complete a task or resolve a problem efficiently. A *despacho*, then, is something like a communiqué or a command to an *exu* to carry out a specific task. Peter Fry compared the use of *despachos* in Afro-Brazilian religions to the common use of *despachantes* (people who are hired to perform certain bureaucratic tasks, usually in interactions with the state) by business people: “The *despachantes* . . . mediate between the State and the common man in the same way that *umbanda* spirits mediate the relationship with a distant and disinterested God. For this reason, the ‘spirits of the shadows’ (principally *Exu*), who are petitioned for favors through the medium of the *despacho*, are as fundamental in this system as the ‘spirits of light’: *Exu* of midnight / *Exu* of the crossroads / the people of *Umbanda* / without *Exu* can’t accomplish anything” (“Manchester, século XIX, e São Paulo, século XX: Dois movimentos religiosos,” in *Para inglês ver*, 40).

7. Like *trabalho*, *despacho* is a polyvalent term with diverse senses. It also denotes the preliminary ritual that opens Candomblé ceremonies, often called the *padê*. In the course of this ritual the *orixá* *Exu* is offered food and other favored items before the other *orixás* are invoked. Among practitioners of Afro-Brazilian variants closer to *Umbanda*, *despacho* can mean any votive offering for the *exu* spirits.

8. *Pontos riscados* are symbolic drawings similar to the *vévés* of Haitian Vodou. They contain symbolic elements specific to a particular spirit and usually are drawn in chalk or embossed on wooden or ceramic tablets.

9. Maggie, *Medo de Feitiço*, 21.

10. Retrieved March 10, 2007, from http://listoe.terra.com.br/planetadinamica/altar/site/lista_altar_pub2.asp?id_user=25333&id_altar=53570.

11. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*.

12. In *Guerra de orixá* Maggie discussed the dissolution of one such community and how various personnel conflicts were manifested in the language of *demandas*.

13. Negrão, “Umbanda,” 119.

14.

Demandas ela não rejeita
 Ela gosta de demandar
 Com seu garfo formoso
 Seus inimigos gosta de espetar.
 (Omolubá, *Maria Mulambo*, 70)

15.

Maria Molambo traz
 linda saia come sete guizos
 Quando roda nos terreiros
 Trabalhando nas demandas
 Mostra que tem muito juízo.
 (Retrieved June 1, 2008, from www.marciaserena.hpg.ig.com.br/pontos_de_exus.htm)

16. Negrão, “Umbanda,” 119.

17. See, for example, Negrão, *Entre a cruz e a encruzilhada*, 357–62; Serra, “No caminho de Aruanda,” 222–23; Prandi, “Pombagira”; Trindade, “Exu: Reinterpretações individualizados de um mito.” This is a dynamic that Raquel Romberg also noted among self-identified *brujos* (witches) in Puerto Rico (*Witchcraft and Welfare*, 138–39).

18. See Serra, “No caminho de Aruanda,” 223.

19. Prandi, “Exu.”

20. Negrão, “Umbanda,” 120.

21. My thinking about *demandas* is inspired by Stephan Palmié’s discussion of the Afro-Cuban *nganga* in *Wizards and Scientists*.

22. The idea of *exus* as a form of alienated labor comes from Brian Brazeal in “Blood, Money, and Fame.” The work of an *exu* spirit, Brazeal observed enriches another, and the entity’s agency and individuality are “lost, willfully cloaked by the client and the practitioner whose interests lie in mystifying the process by which the outcome was brought about” (57). Although I find Brazeal’s description of *exus* as a form of alienated labor insightful, my research contradicts his generalization that the client who petitions an *exu* does not want a relationship with that entity, and that the *exu*’s agency and individuality are deliberately obscured by those who invoke them. In my experience clients can become *serviteurs*, and petitioners often talk at length about specific *exus* and the “work” that these entities have done in their lives.

23. See Palmié’s discussion of “genealogies of morality” in chapter 2 of *Wizards and Scientists*, particularly p. 165.

24. Ortiz, *A morte branca do feiticeiro negro*; Bastide, *The African Religions of Brazil*.

25. Bastide, *African Religions*, 303–19.26. *Ibid.*, 322.

27. The classic account of Latin American devil beliefs and practices as a creative response to capitalism is Michael Taussig’s *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*.

28. Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists*, 66.

29. The Portuguese *feitiço* is the root of *feitiçaria* and the English *fetish*. In medieval Portugal *feitiço* (derived from the Latin *factitius*, “manufactured”) meant “magic” or “witchcraft” and was used by theologians in reference to the dangerous powers of female sexuality. According to William Pietz, the English word *fetish* (and its cognates in other European languages) derives from *fetisso*, the pidgin version of *feitiço* first used among sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European traders along the West African coast to refer to a variety of African objects and practices. Disseminated into a variety of European languages in the seventeenth century, the term *fetish* was subsequently adopted by anthropologists, sociologists, psychoanalysts, Marxists, and other theorists to explain various “material expressions of personal or cultural fixation” (“Fetish,” 197). Although used somewhat differently in these different disciplines, Pietz argued that the basic idea of the fetish was linked to the problematic capacity of material objects to embody religious, commercial, aesthetic, and sexual values simultaneously and sequentially. See also Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, I.”

30. Jane Fernandes and Éden Nilo, “Maria Padilha é Pomba Gira,” *Correio da Bahia*, April 3, 2004, www.correiodabahia.com.br/2004/04/03/noticia.asp?link=notoooo90751.xml.

31. On the symbolic vocabulary of the Haitian *wanga* and its contemporary usages, see McAlister, “A Sorcerer’s Bottle”; K. M. Brown, “Making Wanga.”

32. Brown, *ibid.*

33. Orsi, “The Gender of Religious Otherness.”

34. Styers, *Making Magic*, 223.

CHAPTER NINE

1. A similar concept is found in other Afro-diasporan religions. For example, Karen McCarthy Brown discussed *balanse* in the context of Haitian Vodou in *Mama Lola*, 374–76.

2. Similarly in her ethnographic work Capone found that “the majority of [possession] crises are concomitant with the passage of a young girl to that of a married woman” (*La quête*, 191).

3. In “An Explanation for the Predominance of Women in the Umbanda Cults of Porto Alegre, Brazil” Patricia Lerch proposed that the predominance of women in Umbanda is a result of the fact that the role of spirit healer functions as an extension of women’s domestic activities and competencies into the public realm, providing women a more autonomous and economically lucrative position than that of housewife.

4. For an analysis of the economic structure of a typical *terreiro*, see Dantas, “A organização econômica de um terreiro de Xangô.” See also, among others, Maggie and Contins, “Gueto cultural ou a Umbanda como modo de vida,” 83–85; and Jensen, “Umbanda and Its Clientele.”

5. Jensen, “Umbanda,” 77. This is not to say that *filhos* do not come and go as well. However, once someone has been initiated his or her ties to a religious leader are stronger and more difficult to break.

6. As opposed to more rural areas, where labor power may be more highly valued. The role of the client may therefore represent an innovation particular to the urban environment and its accompanying market economy, a hypothesis that warrants further investigation.

7. I was not able to determine whether this was due to Nazaré's efforts to increase her authority or his own efforts to increase her financial dependence. It may well have been a combination of both.

8. An annual event that features female impersonators (the majority *travestis*) from every state in Brazil competing for the title of Miss Gay Brazil, closely patterned on the Miss America and Miss Universe contests. Contestants compete in talent, evening wear, and bathing suit categories before a panel of semi-famous judges. That year, one of the judges was the former (biologically female) Miss Brazil, a fact that, though unremarkable to my Brazilian companions, I found delightfully surreal.

9. Seu Zé never referred to himself as a *travesti* in my hearing, although he was so classified by others. Although he always sported ostentatiously manicured fingernails and a mane of hair extensions, he did not attempt to pass as a woman; offstage he did not wear female clothing or modify his voice or gestures, nor had he taken female hormones or implanted silicone to give his body a more feminine shape. Neither did he derive his income from prostitution, as many *travestis* do. Rather he identified as a *transformista*, a female impersonator, although he retained some of his feminine accoutrements, such as fingernails and long hair, when not performing. By the time I met him, however, Seu Zé largely had retired from performing, although he often made "guest appearances" at local nightclubs. Don Kulick discussed the world of *travestis* and the various intersections of gender, body, and sexuality in Brazil in his ethnography of male transvestite prostitutes in Bahia, *Travesti: Sex, Gender and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes* and in "The Gender of Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes." Brazilian sociologists and anthropologists have been writing about the phenomenon of *travestis* since the late 1980s, among them M. J. Oliveira, *Jogo de cintura*; N. M. de Oliveira, *Damas de paus*; Silva, *Travestis*.

10. He also underwrote the annual *feira* for Molambo, but I have limited my description to Padilha's party as the two were structurally identical.

11. The equivalent of about \$450 at the time.

12. And indeed by my count he had. The preparations for this party alone consumed most of one week and the labor of all members of the house. Among other things, Seu Zé financed several small improvements to the center, including a new bathroom, new paint, and the construction of a small stage in the driveway; he had purchased new furniture and ritual containers for the ceremonial space, as well as all of the food and drink that would be consumed by the spirits and close to one hundred guests. He had also provided the elaborate costume for Padilha, a formal dress of sumptuous fabric complete with coordinating cape, gold jewelry and tiara, and a matching gold cigarette case and holder, as well as dozens of flower arrangements and decorations, including baskets of rose petals that were showered on Padilha as she made her entrance. He had hired a samba band, rented tables and chairs, and purchased fireworks for the after-ceremony celebration.

13. While Nilmar tolerated another man making demands on Nazaré's time, albeit grudgingly, Seu Zé apparently could not.

14. See, for example, Birman, *Fazer estilo criando gêneros*; Teixeira, "Lorogum."

15. The *roncô* is a room where ritual objects and individual *assentamentos* (altars) are kept and only initiated members of the community may enter. During the course of the initiations that I witnessed, the neophytes rarely left this room.

16. James Wafer recounted a story that he was told in Bahia in which one of the seven husbands of Maria Padilha was Tranca Rua (*The Taste of Blood*, 11–13).

17. Participants are quite cognizant of the strategic utility of possession trance, and speculation about or accusations of false possession are a frequent aspect of most (if not all) heterodox spirit groups, reflecting the all-too-human antagonisms and alliances that invest any religious endeavor.

18. This aspect is more fully addressed in close ethnographic studies of practitioners rather than those studies that address these religions more generally or focus on rituals or theologies. See, for example, the section titled "Network of Clients" in Brumana and Martínez, *Spirits from the Margins*, 139–50. This section explores the social networks within which information about and evaluations of religious centers, leaders, doctrines, and practices are exchanged among clients and participants, including speculations of this type. Another case study, Márcia Contins's "O caso da Pomba Gira," illustrates the complex dynamic of social ties as expressed within religious idioms and practices.

19. Among others, Janice Boddy, Karen McCarthy Brown, Pamela Constantinides, Vincent Crapanzano, Susan Kenyon, I. M. Lewis, Aihwa Ong, and Esther Pressel.

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